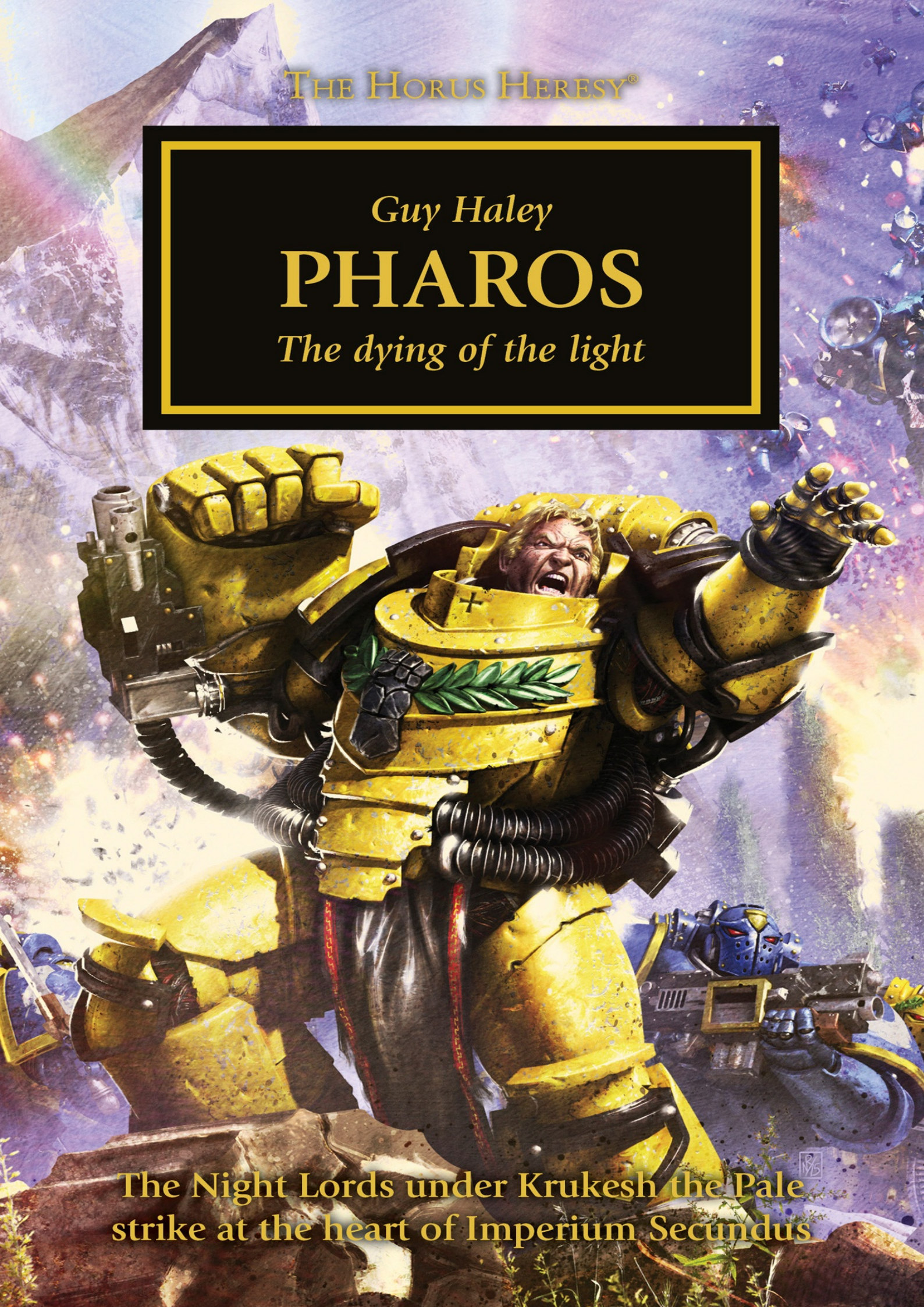
THE HORUS HERESY®

Guy Haley

PHAROS

The dying of the light



The Night Lords under Krukesh the Pale strike at the heart of Imperium Secundus

VISIT…

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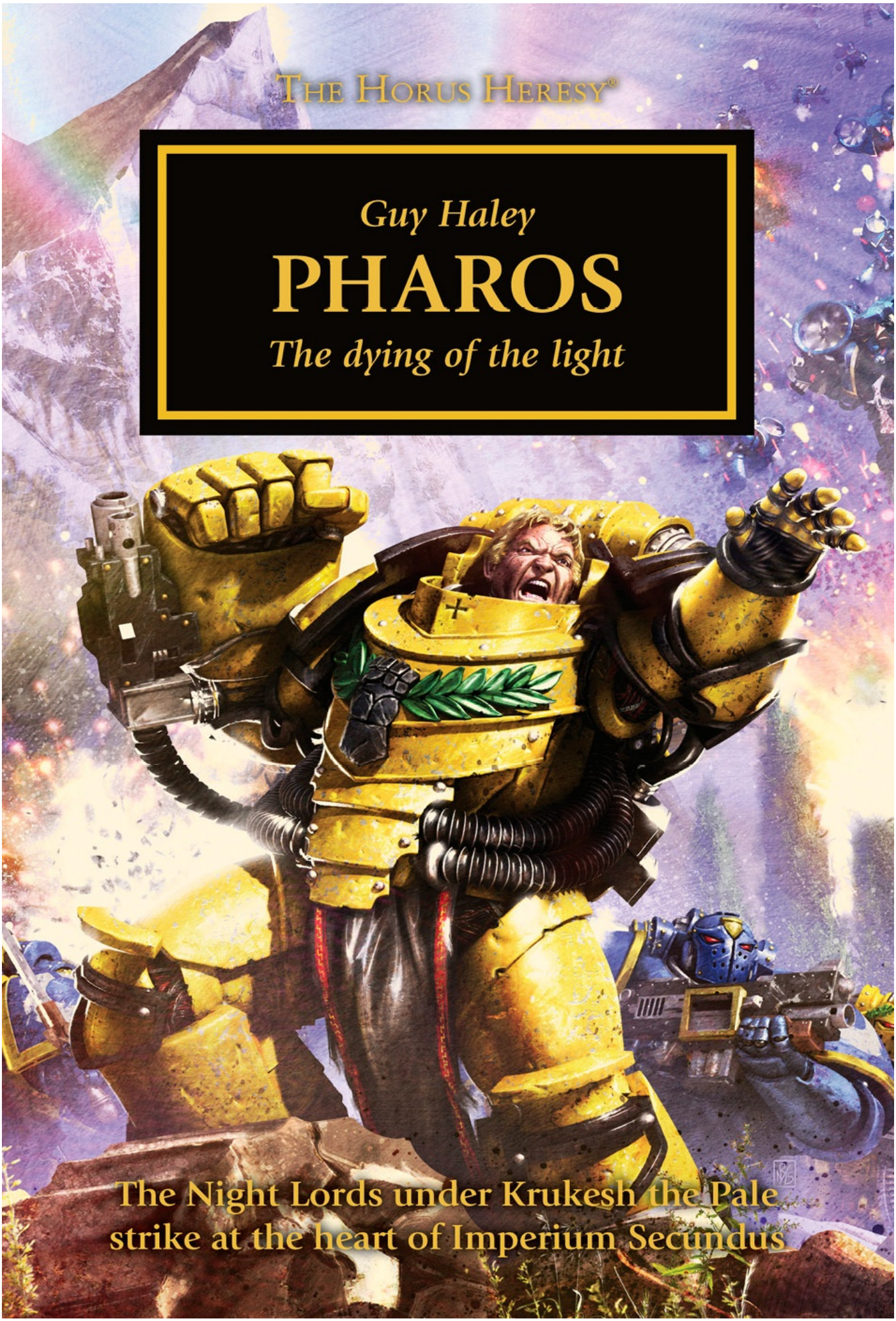

The Night Lords under Krukesh the Pale strike at the heart of Imperium Secundus

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THE HORUS HERESY®

Guy Haley

PHAROS

The dying of the light

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THE HORUS HERESY®

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The IX Legion 'Blood Angels'

SANGUINIUS, The reluctant emperor, ruler of Imperium Secundus, primarch of the IX Legion

AZKAELLON, Commander, Sanguinary Guard

The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN, Master of Ultramar, the Avenging Son, primarch of the XIII Legion

VALENTUS DOLOR, Tetrarch of Ultramar (Occluda), Primarch's Champion

TITUS PRAYTO, Master of the Presiding Centuria, Librarius

SERGIO, Epistolary

ADALLUS, Captain, 199th 'Aegida' Company

HESPATIAN, Primus Medicae

TARICUS, Apothecary

GENUS, Vexillary

ODILLIO, Sergeant

ACHAMENIDES, Sergeant

SOLUS, Sergeant

ARKUS, Squad sergeant, 55th Scout Cohort, 'Aegida' Company

OBERDEII, Scout

TEBECAI, Scout

TOLOMACHUS, Scout

SOLON, Scout

FLORIAN, Scout

MALLIUS, Scout

KRISSAEOS, Scout

LETHICUS, Sergeant, and legionary commander of the *Probity*

CAIAS, Battle-brother

TIBERIUS, Battle-brother

HELLAS, Battle-brother

GELLIUS, Shipmaster, *Probity*

JULIANA VRATUS, Vox-officer

LUCRETIUS CORVO, Honoured captain, 90th 'Nova' Company

HEPHTUS, Apothecary

DAMIUS, Vexillary

CORRELUS, Techmarine

CRASSUS, Sergeant

BELLEPHON, Battle-brother

GOLLODON, Battle-brother

CEREAN, Battle-brother

VALENTIAN, Shipmaster, *Glorious Nova*

MATHERIS, Helmsman

The First Legion, 'Dark Angels'

ALCUIS, Captain, legionary commander of the *Watcher*

The VIII Legion, 'Night Lords'

KRUKESH, 'The Pale', new lord of the Kyroptera

GENDOR SKRAIVOK, 'The Painted Count', claw master, 45th Company

BERENON, Battle-brother, formerly of the Librarius

GALLIVAR

KELLENDVAR, Headsman

KELLENKIR

KARRIG VORSH

BORDAAN

FORVIAN, Claw leader

ANCIENT CARAKON, Venerable Contemptor Dreadnought

BENTHEN GESH, Claw master, Seventh Company

Wardens of the Pharos

BARABAS DANTIOCH, Disgraced warsmith of the Iron Warriors

Alexis Polux, Captain, 405th Company, Imperial Fists

Carantine, Magos biologis, Mechanicum

Beta-Phi 97, Datasmith

Imperial Personae

Hulio Vitellius, Lieutenant, Sothan First Auxilia (irregular)

Mericus Giraldus, Sergeant, Sothan First Auxilia (irregular)

'Tiny' Jonno

Hasquin

Martinus

Chelvan Quintus

Dorican

Morio

Hanspire

Pontian

Aelius

Govenisk, Sergeant, Sothan First Auxilia (irregular)

Kolom Bolarion, Sergeant, Sothan First Auxilia (irregular)

Demethon

Klavius

Other forgotten heroes and lost souls, as the vagaries of the Pharos permit

PART ONE

THE EYE OF THE STORM

ONE

Dishonour
The proving
Secrets and lies

Oberdeii was in danger.

The combat servitor walked into the practice cage, slow and idiot stiff, until the cage door clanged down behind it, its combat protocols engaged, and there was nothing idiotic about it any more. A psychotic, vestigial intelligence glimmered in its eyes. Drool ran in sheets from its mouth, a side-effect of the combat drugs pumping around its body from the brass apparatus embedded in its back. Half the skull was replaced by steel. What skin it had left was corpse grey, puckered and puffy around its implants. One hand had been replaced by a motorised circular blade, the other arm had been severed halfway to the elbow and a wickedly edged sword grafted in its place. Its muscles had been thickened to a grotesque size by growth agents, the legs lent further strength by piston-levered callipers.

The servitor wore the same heavy, rubberised bodysuit that all the servitors Oberdeii had ever seen wore, and when he had activated it for the session it had looked little different from its peaceful peers, those that cleaned, cooked and carried for the XIII Legion without demur.

No longer. Electrical power surging through its remade body revealed its true nature: a murderous machine-man programmed to do its utmost to kill its opponent.

For a moment the neophyte considered that he might have made a mistake. Then the servitor's saw blade buzzed into life, it lurched into a staggering charge, and Oberdeii had no more time for doubt.

Oberdeii fought with a simple steel gladius taken from the training room's armoury. He was not yet entitled to his own, and he probably never would be. So alien at first, the heft of the short-bladed sword had become intimately familiar to him. It fit his palm perfectly, it felt right. Now that rightness sickened him. He would never be presented with the blade he had striven so hard to win. The practice sword was the failing promise of a future he would never see.

Only months away from the end of his training, Oberdeii had been tainted, and was therefore unworthy of the Legion.

The servitor swung the heavy buzzsaw up and over its head as it closed. Oberdeii screamed full in its face, giving voice to his anger and shame. Bracing the gladius' blade against his left hand, he caught the saw blade on his weapon's edge. Sparks showered from the metal and hissed onto his bare skin. He welcomed the pain. The sense of impending death sharpened his immature reflexes. If he were to fail, he would at least feel like a legionary once.

The servitor was enormously strong. Oberdeii's muscles protested against the pressure it put upon the blade, and yet they held. The servitor growled, blowing aseptic breath over his face.

Oberdeii went with the servitor's attack, turned its motion against it to fling its great mass to one side, and he marvelled at his own strength. He was still amazed at the power he had been granted. Not very long ago he had had the spare muscles of any youth, but now his arms were thick and powerful. For the last two years synthetic biochemicals had driven his metabolism into overdrive. Supplementary organs moderated every aspect of his physiology. When their work was finished, they would bring perfection to the randomly created, misfiring systems of nature. What had taken millions of years to evolve into a clumsy, unfinished state, the Emperor had perfected in mere decades.

Oberdeii was four months from his final assessment, and not grown fully. There was still an ache in his throat from the last round of implants. He had yet to attain his full height and his full might. The man-machine he battled was among the most potent training tools in the armoury. It had been created to test a full battle-brother to the limit, and as Oberdeii angrily reflected, he was not a legionary yet.

Animalistic roars blared from the vox-unit implanted into the combat-servitor's chest. It moved with a smoothness that was an absurd contrast to its ugliness. Turning its stumble into a devastating attack, it swung its entire body around, arms fully extended, sending the gleaming sword-point speeding through the air towards Oberdeii's midriff. Oberdeii bent his belly back. The tip scraped over his stomach, opening a shallow scratch. The machine whirled, bringing its whirring saw-blade in a horizontal following attack. Oberdeii barely caught the motion in time. A clumsy parry jarred the sword in his hand so hard his fingers became numb. He readjusted his grip as he danced back.

He could almost hear Sergeant Arkus – *you're gripping it too hard, lad!* Careless, he scolded himself, unworthy.

The machine circled him. Oberdeii tensed as it came at him again – pistons hissing, heavy-booted feet thundering into the cage's metal floor – to butt him in the chest with its reinforced skull, driving the wind from the Scout's lungs and carrying him back hard across the cage and into the bars. The structure vibrated at the impact. The cyborg forced Oberdeii's sword hand down and back with its forearm, the metal pins securing the prosthetic to its bones digging painfully into the youth's wrist. Twice it banged Oberdeii's arm against the bars, until the sword dropped from his treacherous fingers. It put its meaty forearm against his throat, the attached saw-blade burring away deafeningly right by Oberdeii's left ear. The blade bit into his cheek, splattering them both with blood. Oberdeii jerked away from it. The servitor could have taken his head off there and then. Instead it pushed hard against the Scout's windpipe, attempting to choke him.

Oberdeii gasped for air. He felt his vulnerable hyoid bone flex under the pressure. The servitor's eyes glared. There was nothing of humanity in them, only a machine-born hatred and a need to kill.

Oberdeii was going to die, and he welcomed it.

He could not bear the dreams, not any more. A darkness was coming. He had heard the whispers beneath Mount Pharos, and ever since then he had been dogged by fear of a peril so vast and monstrous that it blotted out all hope in his soul, for he could do nothing to avert it.

Knowledge tyrannised him, and it would not let him sleep.

Six weeks in the apothecarion recovering. After lights out he lay with his eyes closed, his nights spent in a feverish non-sleep that took him back into the dark of the mountain and the terrible truths that lived there. When he woke, if he could call it waking, he began every day-cycle with the same foreboding.

Fear and knowledge were why he would fail. Terror was why he had come to the training room in the dead of night.

His throat closed. His physiology went into overdrive to conserve oxygen. The servitor snarled out its programmed fury. Oberdeii's veins bulged and his face reddened. His eyes felt as if they would burst.

In desperation, he spat in the servitor's face.

It was a poor spit – with his throat constricted he could not milk his Betcher's gland effectively, nor propel the poison it produced. Acid sprayed into the servitor's face in a spattering cloud.

The servitor reeled back, blinded. Oberdeii dived to the side as it recovered and swung its sawblade right through the space where his head had been. The combat augmetic connected with the cage bar with such force it tore through the metal with a horrendous squealing sound.

Its target eluding it, the servitor stopped. Oberdeii froze, his eyes fixed on his dropped blade. The servitor cocked its head to one side, searching for the boy, insensible of the acid burning its face. Oberdeii stifled his urge to draw in huge gasps of air to replenish his empty lungs, in case it heard him. Holding his breath after his choking was an ordeal. Spots whirled in front of his eyes. He should have thought to inflate his multilung before entering the ring. That would have given him minutes more oxygen. He cursed himself for not thinking to utilise his new abilities to their full advantage.

He stayed motionless as the machine-man stepped round in a half-circle. His sword lay on the far side of the creature.

There was only one possible practical. Oberdeii wasted no time on thought. He let out a shout, putting all his frustration into it. The servitor zeroed in on his position instantaneously. Oberdeii rolled as the saw-blade slammed into the floor, bit into the plating and dragged the servitor forward. Darting past his opponent, Oberdeii grabbed his gladius and ran around the inside of the bars, dragging the broad tip over them to make them sing. The servitor followed the noise. Oberdeii stopped, and it leapt. He dodged a sword thrust, grabbed the servitor's sword arm and pushed it out through the bars, jamming the elbow hard up against a crossbrace. He stabbed through the elbow, then hacked down at the servitor's legs.

It was an inelegant blow, but it served its intended purpose. Hydraulic fluid spurted from severed lines in the calipers. The left leg sagged. Oberdeii danced away as the servitor thrashed at the cage to extract its paralysed arm. The Scout slashed through the steel-cable tendon of its ankle, then jumped back as the servitor yanked out its ruined arm and came after him. A second of elation turned to dismay as his foot folded under him and he fell backwards.

The servitor took a step, put its damaged leg down, and fell directly on top of the boy.

Oberdeii got his sword-point up in the nick of time. The weight of the servitor forced the weapon through its metal-dense body. The weapon was at an awkward angle, and something gave in his wrist. He ignored the pain and dragged the sword around in the servitor's innards. The machine made a high-pitched mechanical wheezing. Teeth clacking madly, it jerked atop him with bruising force, then went limp.

The saw-blade spun for a few seconds more, and stopped.

Oberdeii gave his sword an experimental twist. There was no response. The servitor's running lights were out.

'You are dead, then,' he said, and let his head thump back onto the deck plates.

He lay under the machine as his hearts slowed. For a few moments he lost himself in their strange dual beat. Of all the changes wrought upon him, that alteration to the fundamental rhythm of his body had taken the most getting used to.

He heaved the cyborg off and stood.

He looked down upon the shattered body leaking blood and oil in equal measure. Whatever crime the servitor had committed in life to deserve its fate would be forever unknown to Oberdeii. He supposed it had paid its dues in full. Final mercy had been granted at his hand. He felt a shudder of revulsion. If he were judged wanting he might find himself in a similar position, for there were few roles suited to failed aspirants. His arm shook violently as he raised it to wipe the sweat pouring off his forehead. He had been suffering mild palsies when under extreme duress. His implants were still not fully biochemically integrated with his body. Apothecary Taricus assured him it would pass.

A choking noise came from Oberdeii's throat.

It would not pass. The process would not finish. He would never be an Ultramarine. He was polluted by the touch of the machine in the mountain. The gladius fell from his hands. He felt sick, feeling the shock afresh yet again. No matter how many times he thought on it, the pain did not lessen.

Oberdeii grieved for the man he would never be.

A gentle cough made him turn. He wiped hurriedly at his cheeks.

'Good morning, Neophyte Oberdeii.' Sergeant Arkus, his squad leader and mentor, was leaning against the wall by the armoury door on the far side of the training room, a mild, unreadable expression on his craggy face. 'Are you going to tell me why you are not asleep in the barracks? Taricus released you only yesterday, and you are already

overstretching yourself.'

'Sergeant!'

'Yes, that is correct. Sergeant. As your sergeant, I asked you a question. As a neophyte, you are bound to answer, yet I hear no answer.'

'I… I can't sleep, sergeant.'

'So you thought you would come and commit suicide instead? That is an extreme cure for insomnia.'

Oberdeii looked down at the dead servitor. 'I seek to better myself for the Legion.'

Arkus pushed himself off the wall and came into the cage. 'Ah, now it all makes sense.'

'Yes, sergeant.' Oberdeii looked up at his teacher. Arkus was a foot taller than the Scout. 'How long were you watching?'

'Long enough to wince at that terrible parry. Hold up your sword.'

Oberdeii stooped for his blade and adopted the stance suitable for unarmoured combat. He gritted his teeth at the pain in his wrist.

Arkus shook his head despairingly.

'Not like that – like *this*.' Arkus' massive hand engulfed Oberdeii's own and twisted it. Oberdeii stifled a yelp as the torn muscle twinged in his wrist. 'Keep the guard angled, blade edge outward towards the parry. If you fight like that a good warrior will have your arm off at the elbow as soon as you point the bloody thing at him!'

'Yes, sergeant. I am sorry.'

'Still,' Arkus said. 'You killed it.' He toed the dead cyborg. Arkus wore a sleeveless chiton and loose trousers, the garb of a farmer or artisan. These simple clothes were supposed to bring unity with the people they had been made to protect. No one could ever mistake Arkus for a normal man; he was seven feet tall, his muscles huge and his skin studded with armour interface ports.

'Thank you, sergeant.'

'That was not praise, boy. If his pain circuits had been deactivated, you would be a dead man. These combat models do not feel much, but if he felt nothing at all the match would not have gone your way.'

Oberdeii shrugged. 'I do not know how to turn them off.'

'There is a reason we do not teach you everything at once, boy.' Arkus looked down at the ruined combat unit. 'That was a theta-class servitor. You're not cleared to face them. It seems we teach you too much as it is.'

Oberdeii opened his mouth to speak, but Arkus shushed him. 'I do not wish to know how you got the activation codes. You did well to defeat it. I do not know whether to censure you or commend you.' He hooked his fingers into his broad belt. The Ultima emblem of the Legion gleamed on the buckle.

Oberdeii looked at his master expectantly. Censure, it should be censure. Arkus had been too lenient with him since the incident in the mountain.

Arkus' mouth became a thoughtful line. 'Adept Criolus is not going to be very happy with you. But… Impressive. Very impressive. Next time, stick to the combat armatures.'

Arkus smiled sadly.

'It is time, isn't it?' said Oberdeii nervously.

Arkus nodded, and his smile vanished. 'Yes, Oberdeii. It is time. The Librarian has finished with the others.'

He rubbed his own head hesitantly. Arkus, along with everyone who had spent long periods near the mountain, had experienced the dreams, although no one else had experienced anything as potent as the terrifying visions Oberdeii had when lost in the labyrinth. And that was the problem.

'He wished to see you last. You must come with me.'

The Scout glanced back uncertainly at the machine corpse as they left. He couldn't shake the feeling that it would be the last time he would be allowed into the practice chamber.

TWO

Judgement
Beneath the mountain
Cohort

Oberdeii followed Arkus through the Sothan orbital, feeling small and sheepish in his mighty footsteps. The narrow corridors were filled to bursting with the legionaries and servants of the 199th ‘Aegida’ Company. It was all he could do not to be stepped upon by the men he so fervently hoped to one day call brother.

Sotha was a rare Terran analogue, and upon discovery had been earmarked for rapid settlement, but the process had been put on indefinite hold by Roboute Guilliman after the discovery of xenos artefacts riddling the tallest mountain of the primary continent. For over a century the world had been cloaked in secrecy, a site of intense investigation that slowly revealed the purpose of the mountain – a grand beacon that sped travel through the warp, allowed communication across immense distances, and might even permit a man to step from one world to another as if walking between rooms.

It was nothing short of miraculous, and it had saved Macragge.

Since the Pharos had been brought online to hold together the Five Hundred Worlds, the dreams the artefact engendered had grown intrusive to the extent that Captain Adallus had relocated his command centre from the surface to the station. Recently it had become so central to the 199th’s operations that the garrison and colonists alike had begun to refer to it as ‘the Aegida platform’.

Everyone made way for Sergeant Arkus and, just before they tripped over him, the boy walking in his shadow. The majority of the company had experienced at least something, and all had been subjected to the scrutiny of the Legion’s high command, so they knew Arkus’ business. None of them knew exactly what had happened to Oberdeii, but they knew it was something. A few brothers nodded at him in understanding. Oberdeii nodded back, bashful and grateful.

The orbital was small. Within twenty minutes Arkus and Oberdeii had crossed the full width of it to arrive at the apothecarion.

The medicae centre was as cramped as the rest of the platform, kept in meticulous order by the four Apothecaries who commanded it. Oberdeii had only been released from the place the day before. His hearts sank as they entered its gleaming white spaces once again. The endless round of tests and implantation procedures he had been subjected to made the apothecarion wearyingly familiar to him, and for weeks since the incident in the mountain he had been confined there. For what must have been the hundredth time, Arkus led his charge down the main corridor past gleaming white doors stamped with the prime helix of the medicae. Unaltered human medicae staff stepped respectfully out of their way, acknowledging the Ultramarines with shallow bows.

This time Arkus took Oberdeii past the door to the chambers where the Scouts spent so much time being monitored and tested and into the main hub of the medicae centre. From there he was taken down a corridor guarded by two warriors in the colours and plate of the Third Company. Oberdeii stole glances at them as he passed, intrigued by their differences in armour, heraldry and weaponry. Another stab of regret hit him, that he would not get to serve alongside nor know such honourable warriors.

Arkus stopped by a large double door, and smiled kindly at Oberdeii. 'Are you ready, lad?' he said.

Oberdeii nodded.

Arkus stood silent a moment. Oberdeii glanced up at him, and saw that conflicting emotions played on his face.

'You remember what the Lion said to us?'

'That we were not to speak of what happened,' said Oberdeii.

'It goes against my instincts, neophyte, I'll admit that to you, but once we are in here, you do not mention the mapping mission into the Pharos, nor do you mention your own experience within.'

'Sergeant–'

'Neophyte Oberdeii, we had a direct order from the Lion. I'd only disobey that if Guilliman himself told me to. To lie to our brothers troubles me, but we cannot ignore the command of a primarch. As far as the officers in there are concerned, your dreams are just stronger and more frequent than the rest. You predicted the arrival of the Blood Angels in Ultramar, after all. Is that clear?'

'Y-yes, sergeant,' stammered Oberdeii. His mouth was dry. At the thought of deceiving his superiors the top of his scalp pulsed, and his palms crawled.

'You're nervous, neophyte. Do not be. Sometimes it is necessary to withhold information,' said Arkus, although his tone suggested he thought otherwise. He pressed the door button. It hissed open, and the sergeant ushered the Scout into a medium-sized, nondescript room he had never been in before.

Four Ultramarines waited inside. Apothecary Taricus, the 199th Company's Surgeon of Recruits, Oberdeii knew well. Two medical auxiliaries stood in attendance of him, and their faces Oberdeii knew also. To Oberdeii's surprise, Captain Adallus himself was there, and he shared a guarded look with the sergeant. The other two officers Oberdeii had never seen before. Both wore full war-plate. One bore the rare insignia of the Librarius, his head cowled by a metal hood studded with blue crystal. The other was a captain and decked with high honours in intimidating profusion. Oberdeii came to an abrupt halt. The captain wore three long-service bars studded into his forehead, his skin had the leathery texture especially ancient legionaries developed, and his hair was iron grey.

'Neophyte Oberdeii, this is Epistolary Sergio of the Librarius,' said Arkus.

Oberdeii looked into eyes that shone with power, and bowed. 'My lord.'

‘This is Captain Hortensian, Invigilatus Major of Recruits.’

Oberdeii’s eyes widened in surprise. He checked his reaction just in time. Hortensian was the highest-ranking officer in the Ultramarines recruitment chamber, ultimately responsible for the intake of the entire *Legion*.

‘My lord,’ he said respectfully.

Hortensian gave Oberdeii a long, piercing look the Scout did his best to meet. ‘Do not be alarmed, neophyte.’

‘I am not alarmed, my lord. Surprised, maybe, and I should not be. Your presence is a logical practical. What happens here on Sotha is unusual.’

‘You speak well. We have been told that you were the worst affected by the beacon,’ said Hortensian.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘You know our purpose here?’

Oberdeii could not keep the sag from his shoulders. ‘To see if I am worthy to continue with my training.’

‘That is so.’

‘He is a fine Scout, and will make an excellent legionary,’ said Arkus. He placed his hands on the youth’s shoulders protectively. ‘I found this one in the practice cages, fighting a theta-class combat drone, no less.’

‘You allow your recruits to engage theta-class?’ said Hortensian.

‘I do not allow it,’ said Arkus. ‘Oberdeii is rarely disobedient, but apparently he’s a resourceful one when he is.’

Hortensian looked down at Oberdeii appraisingly. Oberdeii struggled to stand to attention. He had stood before Guilliman himself. The weight of this man’s regard was somehow heavier.

‘Your bearing betrays your fears, Neophyte Oberdeii,’ said the Invigilatus. ‘It is not up to you to decide whether or not you are fit, but to me.’

Oberdeii nodded. ‘Yes, my lord. I await your judgement.’

‘You seem eager to have it.’

‘I am, my lord,’ said Oberdeii. ‘Once you have given your judgement, then I will know what my future holds, and be better placed to formulate an appropriate practical. Knowing nothing, I cannot formulate a sound course of action.’

‘A good statement. None shall challenge you, and you may return to your unit without doubt – if you are deemed worthy.’ He paused. ‘What if you are not?’

‘I will do as commanded.’

Hortensian nodded. ‘As you should. Apothecary, Epistolary, please begin.’

‘Oberdeii, if you would lie down?’ Apothecary Taricus gestured to a slab bed that slid from the wall.

Oberdeii did as he was asked without question.

Apothecary Taricus stood at Oberdeii’s side. His human medicae assistants fussed over the Scout, attaching a number of monitoring devices to his arms. Oberdeii limply accepted their ministrations, his eyes fixed on the white ceiling. He wondered how many hours he had spent of his life staring at ceilings such as that.

‘What have you done to yourself?’ tutted Taricus as he went over Oberdeii’s wounds. ‘I only released you from the apothecarion yesterday. Are you so keen to return?’

‘No, Apothecary, I wish to be worthy,’ said Oberdeii. ‘There is no other ambition for a neophyte.’

‘See that you do not destroy all our hard work in your striving.’ Taricus took a bulky injection pod from a silver tray proffered by one of his nurses. ‘This will relax you. Brother Sergio will then examine you.’ Taricus pressed the injector against his bicep. There was a quiet hiss, and coloured dots crowded out the apothecarion from his vision.

Oberdeii came the closest he had been to sleeping since the day he had fallen into the dark, but there was to be no rest for him.

He shuddered, and he was back in the mountain…

His breathing thundered in his ears, the whine of his blood a deafening contretemps. His agitation had activated his secondary heart again, and the sounding of the double-thump of his pulse intensified his feelings of unworthiness. He was no warrior, but a lost boy, frightened of things in the night.

He tried to ignore the half-formed presences lurking at the edge of his senses. He tried to keep his training to the forefront of his mind, to banish all emotion..

Focus, *he thought.* They shall know no fear.

That had been the Emperor’s command and promise of the Legiones Astartes.

Focus on it.

But for all his enhancements and hypno-training, he was no Space Marine. Not yet.

He was terrified. A deeper fear gripped him, that he had failed like so many before him, that his fear made him unworthy to join the ranks of the XIII as a full legionary. The shame angered him, and though the anger fought his fear, still he anticipated what was to come with dread. He remembered what happened exactly, cursed by his enhanced memory. The pain of the knowledge would live with him forever, even as the faces of his family faded.

His dream self rode his memories, urging the Oberdeii of the past to stop where he was, not to take the next step and take the plunge into the night and its terrible illumination. He wanted to turn around, to find some small light that would hold back the dark.

But he could not. All this had already happened.

Four steps, that was all. Four steps before he fell and he knew too much. Oberdeii's foot lifted, and his dream self shouted out a warning, urging him to embrace the safety of ignorance.

A mind touched his own. Calm suffused him. In his dream, his foot paused, halting above the abyss.

'Enough,' an unfamiliar voice said, and the dream was over.

A hand took his, firm and fatherly.

Oberdeii opened his eyes. They were gritty as if from a long night's sleep. The whiteness of the apothecarion dazzled him after the remembered dark.

'Neophyte Oberdeii. Are you awake?'

Sergeant Arkus stood over him, holding his hand gently.

It took Oberdeii a moment to gather his thoughts.

'Oberdeii?' Arkus looked behind himself and spoke to the others. 'He has been like this often.'

Oberdeii held up his hand and pushed himself from the cot. The gel pads of monitoring equipment that had not been there when he went into his vision pulled at his skin. Shakily, he swung his legs over the side.

'I am awake.'

His throat was dry. Had he slept? He hung his head, and gripped the side of the bed. His hands felt too large. In the dream, he had not been as he was. He had retreated to an earlier, more vulnerable state. A true boy, not a half-way chimera between human and transhuman.

'I am awake,' he repeated, mainly to convince himself.

Taricus motioned that Oberdeii should lift the sleeve of his tunic. The hypo device rotated a fresh set of needles into position, and he pressed these into the boy's arm. Taricus held up the attached device to his face and hummed at the results playing over the screen, then consulted the larger display embedded in the wall over the cot. 'All results are normal. The neophyte remains a perfect subject for transformation, medically speaking.'

A third spoke. Oberdeii lifted his head at the sound of this voice, for it had spoken in his dream.

'He shows no sign of psychic taint. The boy is not a psyker,' said Sergio.

Arkus looked down at Oberdeii as if asking his permission for something, then stood between his ward and his examiner.

'It is as I said, Brother Sergio. None of my boys have such abilities. Please inform Lord Prayto of your findings, and all will be in order. He is an exceptional candidate.'

‘Arkus,’ said Adallus warningly.

Sergio’s eyes narrowed. Oberdeii longed to escape their scrutiny.

‘It is as Sergeant Arkus says,’ said Adallus. ‘All of us who have spent any time on the mountain have had similar dreams and visions. Oberdeii has spent more time there than most, that is all.’

‘Why?’ asked Hortensian. ‘Your rotation schedule says no member of the Hundred and Ninety-Ninth spends longer than one week upon the surface at a time.’

‘Oberdeii spent a lot of time there before I altered the company’s duty roster. The Scouts have done, and still do, a lot of their training around the area. The terrain is ideal, and they add another layer of security to operations there.’

‘You also have spent a great deal of time on the surface, brother,’ countered Hortensian. ‘Your experiences have not put you into a near coma.’

Oberdeii watched his superiors. A certain amount of tension entered the exchange.

‘None of you report the intensity of what this boy says he experienced,’ said Sergio.

‘None of the rest of us are neophytes,’ said Arkus. ‘He is the youngest of all the recruits. Perhaps his age makes him more susceptible. He was the one who dreamed of the arrival of Sanguinius and the Ninth Legion, to our advantage. It is a matter of exposure, I hold.’

Sergio stared at Adallus a long time, his face inscrutable. ‘You understand that we must investigate these manifestations. The enemy openly courts extra-dimensional fiends.’

‘Daemons,’ said Adallus flatly.

‘If you will,’ said Sergio. ‘However you name them, we have entered uncharted territory. No potential risk can go unchallenged.’

‘I myself dreamed of Curze’s attack on Magna Macragge Civitas, and I am no pysker,’ said Adallus.

‘You are not,’ agreed Sergio.

‘So then,’ said Adallus. ‘Now you have judged us all, and Oberdeii you have probed the longest. Surely you are done with your investigation?’

‘Your tone is sharp, captain,’ warned Hortensian.

‘My apologies, brother. I am diverting a great deal of time and energy to this investigation when I should be seeing to the fortification of Sotha. I beg your forgiveness.’

‘Remember that we are here at the primarch’s command, Adallus,’ said Hortensian. ‘Epistolary, are you satisfied?’

Sergio breathed out. His face lost its intensity, and relaxed. He blinked like a man drawn abruptly from the fields of memory. He transformed in that moment, becoming someone kinder, though his air of uncanniness lingered. ‘I am.’

‘Your verdict?’

‘I shall return to Lord Prayto and report that the Hundred and Ninety-Ninth is free of the influence of the warp.’

‘What of the visions? Is there anything more to be gleaned from them?’ said Hortensian.

‘Oberdeii has a foreboding of some great calamity,’ said Sergio. ‘That much I could read. There have been verified precognitive episodes here, but equally many legionaries have had dreams that have not come to pass. Any foreknowledge is unreliable, and predictions from a xenos machine I am suspicious of. Furthermore, once one is aware that visions and omens are possible, then every ripple in a pool of water takes on unwarranted significance. What concerns Oberdeii could be conjured from imagination alone. Best to be vigilant against any threat. It is all we can do. What I am sure of is that whatever is causing your warriors to experience what they do, is not born directly of the immaterium.’

‘What is it?’ asked Adallus. ‘Are my men safe?’

The Librarian shrugged. ‘A question better suited for a Techmarine than I, but I see no adverse effect.’

‘An opinion that will satisfy the Lord Protector, and our father.’

‘I believe so,’ said Sergio.

Arkus’ stance lost some of its tension. ‘And Neophyte Oberdeii? Do you judge him fit for his duties?’

The Librarian smiled at the youth. ‘Another question better directed elsewhere, sergeant. You are the man to answer that. But if you want my opinion, I agree that he will make a fine warrior.’

‘Then why do I feel fear?’ blurted out Oberdeii.

He looked at his superiors wretchedly.

‘You have experienced a great shock,’ said Taricus. ‘Your indoctrination is incomplete. Your reaction is well within acceptable limits. It will be months more until your conditioning is finished and fear banished forever.’

‘What he is trying to say, boy,’ said Arkus, ‘is that with everything that has been happening, it is normal to be afraid.’

‘I… I have not failed?’

‘Your candidacy is unaffected. I fully expect your anxiety to diminish and disappear,’ said Taricus. He took a data-slate from his auxiliaries, checked it and dismissed them. ‘If it does not, you must be truthful and tell me or a member of the induction staff. Fear can be dealt with. What is your opinion, captain?’

‘Far be it for me to interfere directly with the Hundred and Ninety-Ninth’s recruitment procedures. If you judge him fit outwith these extraordinary events, then fit he is.’

Oberdeii looked to Arkus. The sergeant was as relieved as the boy.

‘Do you wish to return to normal duties, Oberdeii?’ asked Arkus. ‘The rest of your cohort

returned from the surface today and are in the auxiliary barracks.'

Oberdeii nodded decisively. 'Yes, my lord. I am tired of this place.'

'And you are not frightened to die?' asked Hortensian.

'Never,' said the boy firmly. 'I fear only failure.'

That, and the dark beneath the mountain, he added to himself. This he did not voice.

'Then there is nothing wrong with you,' Arkus said reassuringly. 'To conquer fear, you first have to face it. A Space Marine knows no fear only because he has bested it.'

'He can rejoin his group's activities as soon as he feels strong enough,' said Taricus. 'Any difficulty he is experiencing is minor and purely psychological. He'll recover more quickly surrounded by his peers.'

'I was strong enough for you to let me go, Apothecary Taricus.' Oberdeii got to his feet. His legs did not betray him as he expected, but felt strong beneath him. 'I am ready to return to my cohort.'

Oberdeii opened up his equipment locker and took out his harness of carapace armour. He weighed the tangle in his hands. Thick leather straps. Cobalt-blue plates of plasteel and laminated fibre weave. The Ultima symbol of the Legion was bold and white upon the left shoulder guard; the curving horns of the letter imprisoned a black scythe, the mark of the 199th Company. His cohort designation was displayed on the right pauldron, a circle quartered in the yellow and black company colours, a white 'LV' painted over the top. The 55th Squad.

He gripped them tightly, resolving to stow them better the next time he had cause to put them away. Placing the armour gently on the floor of his locker, he took out the rest of his uniform: off-white fatigues, more leather strap webbing for his multiple pouches, holstered bolt pistol and sheathed combat knife.

Thoughtfully, he unpinned his duty robes. For so long he had been fixated on the difficulties of passing the recruitment process. Now his fear of failure abated, leaving him peculiarly calm. He was irritated with himself. His uniform was in a state Arkus would refer to as a disgrace. There was nothing new there, but for the first time Oberdeii agreed with him. He had to do better.

His thoughts were rudely interrupted by a wiry body crashing into his side. Arms wrapped around him in a high tackle that took him down to the floor.

Oberdeii twisted onto his back, jammed his feet against his attacker's chest and heaved upwards, slamming the assailant into the row of lockers with a resounding boom that echoed through the empty arming room.

Tebecai, Oberdeii's squad-brother, sprawled on the floor, alternating between boyish laughter and gasping at the blow. A wiry boy from the far side of the Five Hundred Worlds, he had funny habits and skin so pale it was luminous as milk. He was incorrigibly cheerful, somewhat irritating, and he never shut up.

He was Oberdeii's closest friend.

'Six weeks up here has done you little harm!' gasped Tebecai. He winced and clutched at his shoulder. 'That hurt!'

Oberdeii tried to scowl, but a slow smile drove it away. 'Tebecai.'

'I hear you have been cleared to join us.'

'You hear right.'

The two of them got to their feet. They clasped arms the warrior's way, until Tebecai yanked Oberdeii hard into an embrace.

'Konor's balls, man, you gave me such a fright! I thought that was it, and you were done.'

'I'm all right!' said Oberdeii. He didn't want to admit he had feared the same. He pushed his friend off. 'Really. There is no need to overreact. I am back and that is an end of it.'

Tebecai rubbed the back of his neck. 'I'm not overreacting. It's not been the same without you. Every night all night Tolomachus has been chucking his guts up, his hormones won't settle. And I have been paired with Solon three times. Three times! Do you know how boring Solon is? "*Umm, err, twenty degrees to the left, up a bit*",' he said, mimicking the other Scout. 'That is the most I get out of him all day. He's such a bore.'

'Tebecai, jabbering relentlessly is not a sign of good character. If he's quiet, he is just quiet.'

'Yeah, well. You probably would say that. You've always been a little less upbeat than me.' He jerked a thumb into his chest. His fading augmentation scars were silver threads on his pale skin. 'You've always had a little of the misery worm in you.'

'I have not. I take things a little more seriously than you, that is all. I want to be worthy of the honour of the Thirteenth. What's your story?'

'"I only want to be worthy of the honour"', parroted Tebecai. 'You don't have to be dreary to be a legionary!' He grabbed Oberdeii in a headlock and rubbed at the stubble of his hair, no matter that Oberdeii was taller and stronger than he. 'Dreary!'

Oberdeii grabbed his wrist and tried to force it back. Tebecai laughed as they mock-fought.

'All right! Enough,' said Oberdeii, laughing a little too as he broke free. 'Give me a rest. I got out of the apothecarion yesterday.'

'I can see,' said Tebecai, nodding at the fresh wounds visible through Oberdeii's open shirt. 'Looks like they weren't gentle with you. What have they done to your face?'

'I've been in the training decks.'

'Fighting what?'

Oberdeii didn't answer, but got his uniform out and began dressing. 'What have we got today?'

‘Hypnomat. Grade V vehicle maintenance and piloting. Six hours of that, two hours of chem-balancing, then weapons strip, then four hours of Legion history. A dull one. You picked a great day to come back.’

‘But I am back.’

‘That you are.’

Tebecai slapped him on the back, and became serious. ‘I am glad of it. You should know that.’

‘Me too. Sitting around up here on my own has been very dull.’

‘Dreary,’ said Tebecai mockingly.

‘Yeah. That.’

Oberdeii attempted cheerfulness for his friend, and in truth only a part was a sham.

Nevertheless, beneath his resolve, his experience within the Pharos dogged him.

Something terrible was going to happen.

THREE

Probity
Nycton
Dilemma

The destroyer *Probity* raced through the middle reaches of the Sothan System. At one and a half kilometres long, it was a small ship. Commensurate with its size, it did not possess much in the way of raw firepower. A quintet of gun turrets down either side of the ship made up port and starboard gun batteries. The flared prow boasted a modest spread of torpedo tubes. A single direct hit from a cruiser-class vessel would render the *Probity* into hot atoms, but what it lacked in ferocity it made up for in speed. Shipmaster Gellius was fond of likening the craft to a rapier set against the slow axe-swings of the bigger ships.

At that moment, all its speed was needed.

The craft's patrol had been interrupted. Long-range auspexes, though compromised by the fury of the Ruinstorm and the blaring interference of the Pharos, had detected a large, metallic mass moving towards Sotha. Alert for intrusion into the vital system, the *Probity* raced to investigate.

'The target vessel is within visual range, my lord,' Shipmaster Gellius informed his legionary master.

Twenty metres across and half as broad, the *Probity*'s small war bridge was a study in economical design. Stepped levels fanned out downwards to the shuttered grand oculus to the fore, each crammed with multiple instrument banks and crew stations arranged in arcs along the levels' leading edges. Upon the topmost dais – the only empty space on the command deck – Sergeant Lethicus observed proceedings. He was solid, even for a legionary, squat and thick-limbed with a head like a bullet and little in the way of neck. He had a certain presence, and that more than his body took up the space of the dais.

'Uncover the oculus,' Lethicus ordered.

The plasteel shutters on the great screen window opened, giving a view down the length of the ship's spine to its plough-blade prow. Unnatural, ruddy light shone onto the crew.

From the mid-orbits of the Sothan System it was almost possible to shut out the Ruinstorm. If one looked to the galactic east away from Ultramar, there the stars glimmered through the storm. The furious filter over reality was weaker in the east. Real space was almost apparent.

The view corewards was another matter. Ultramar drowned in blood-red light. The raw fury of the sorcerous tempest was such that it had intruded from the warp into the realms of reality and cast a crimson veil over the cosmos. A false sky of terrible colour and violence split the Imperium. Two stars besides Sotha's own sun shone in that turmoil, and both were lies. Not suns; one was the lone world of Ultramar illuminated by the arcane technologies of the Pharos beacon upon the world of Sotha. The second light was the

beacon itself. Illuminated and illuminator shone against the storm. The rest of Ultramar's Five Hundred Worlds and the wider galaxy were lost to sight.

Macragge was a lonely harbour in a sea of horrors.

Lethicus put his full weight on the railing, leaning out over Shipmaster Gellius' station. There was no throne for the legionary, as Lethicus' predecessor had ordered it torn out. His reasoning had been that with five officers and twelve servitors occupying most of the bridge, a throne for someone of transhuman bulk did nothing but crowd it further.

What was not said was that placing one of the Legion in such an exalted position was at best an indulgence and at worst an affront to the authority of the human shipmaster.

Lethicus agreed. He was painfully aware of the disparities in power between the Legion and its unmodified servants. For too long he had felt distant from those he protected. Horus' betrayal had made him sensitive again to his identity. The men of the Legion were of humanity, not above it. Lethicus had never been an emotional person, not before his elevation, and certainly not since. Nevertheless, he felt a vague sense of disgust at how far he had allowed himself to drift from his own species.

The destroyer surged forward on a hot blade of plasma. For a long space of time, nothing was visible, although auspex soundings indicated that they drew near to their target.

A dark shadow became apparent on the roil of the storm.

No lights shone from the vessel, no starlight picked out its edges; the only indicator of its presence was the slight dimming of the storm glow. To the half-blind auspexes of the destroyer, the ship had been almost invisible until, by chance, it had wandered into the instruments' shortened range. On screens, on hololith projections and in baffling lines of binaric screed, it registered as an enormous yet entirely inert piece of metal. Even this close one had to know where to look in order to see it.

The circular door at the rear of the bridge slid open, splitting the embossed Ultima in the middle and dragging it away into the wall. Brother Caias, Squad Lethicus' second in command, entered. The armsmen by the door snapped out a salute.

'You took your time, Caias,' grumbled Lethicus.

'Drill, Lethicus. Do it right or not at all. We were not under attack. We were almost done, I insisted we finish.'

Lethicus moved his head in a gesture that might have been agreement.

'What is it that has you all exercised?' Caias asked.

'We are close now.'

'A ship?'

'As we feared, it is a vessel. Legiones Astartes.'

'A strike cruiser?' said Caias. He leaned forward, squinting through the oculus against the maddening light of the storm. The ship grew by the second, giving up its secrets slowly.

‘Hard to tell whose. Looks badly mauled. Do you think it came in following the Pharos?’

‘If it had, why is it not at Macragge? Why did it arrive in the Sothan System? Only the location illuminated by the beam is visible in the warp, not the beacon itself.’

Once they came within a thousand kilometres, the ship grew rapidly in the forward view. It was much larger than the *Probity*, but as the auspex reported, devoid of life.

‘Your orders, my lord?’ Shipmaster Gellius was an able commander, but nevertheless he glanced over his shoulder at the Space Marine behind him for direction.

‘Take us around it. Slowly,’ said Lethicus gruffly.

‘Ordered and understood,’ said Gellius.

The *Probity* slowed. Minutes passed. Manoeuvring carefully, the destroyer pulled alongside the larger ship at a distance of ten kilometres.

‘A total wreck,’ said Caias dismissively.

‘That is no reason not to be careful.’

‘I agree, brother. But we shall be seeing a lot more of this. War is everywhere, there are plenty of nearly dead ships making it into the warp and not making it out again. So many others are disappearing en route. We cannot afford to jump at every derelict. Let us report it and move on.’

‘It is too much of a coincidence that it is here, at Sotha. Take us in closer, Gellius. Bring us within three hundred metres.’

‘Aye, my lord. Helm, watch for attendant debris. Engines, ahead one quarter. Spine gunners stand by. If anything larger than a fleck of paint comes near us, shoot it down,’ Gellius said.

The *Probity* slowed further, matching pace with the wreck. Now the ships were at equal relative velocity, the cruiser’s progress was reduced to a deceptive ponderousness, rotating off-centre of its mass so that its prow and stern described tight circles.

Search beams stabbed out from the starboard of the *Probity*, punching holes of brilliance into the dark of the ruined hull. Hard white light picked out great gouges down the sides of the craft, and ragged holes striped by buckled decks. Plumes of condensing gas leaked into space. Around the breaches the metal was rimed with gas frosts. A myriad fragments of metal followed the wreck in a cloud, dragged along in its gravity wake.

‘Throne! There’s nothing left of it,’ said Caias. ‘I don’t see a functioning gun. That can’t have been the storm alone.’

‘That’s definitely battle scarring, not warp damage,’ said Lethicus.

‘Give me a full auspex sweep,’ said Gellius.

‘Aye, shipmaster,’ said Juliana Vratus, the ship’s auspex and vox-officer. Three servitors groaned their compliance in unison as she tasked them with the order.

‘Helm, take us over the top,’ said Gellius. He snapped off a number of crisp commands

and his metal-tipped fingers danced in the air, accessing a light-spun interface that only Gellius' augmetic eyes could see.

The *Probity* turned neatly and passed over the top of the intruder. Broken dorsal towers slid beneath her keel.

Servitors burbled and ground their teeth behind metal masks. The auspex station shone with fresh streams of incoming data. 'No traces of power or life signs,' said Vratus. 'The ship has suffered catastrophic damage. There are residual plasma leaks on the port side.' She glanced up at the oculus. 'They should be visible now. There.'

Orange targeting reticles zeroed in on spouts of gas emanating from the craft's reactor block, these glowing with the false colour of great heat.

'Those are driving the ship's revolution. Magnitude of pressure suggests reactor death and breaching some time within the last week.'

'Any idea of which Legion she was from?' asked Caias.

'No identification cypher is being broadcast. Electromagnetically speaking, it is dead. I can run a silhouette identification routine through the cogitators, but that will take some time.'

Lethicus shook his head. 'It's a plain ship. I don't see any adornment or Legion iconography.'

'It's hard to tell the colour of the livery,' said Caias. 'Could be dark blue, or black. There's a start.'

'Raven Guard, Night Lords, Iron Hands, Dark Angels, take your pick.' Lethicus' armoured hands gripped hard as he scanned the derelict's every night-coloured surface. 'Can you get me a look at the bow plate, Gellius?'

'As you wish, sergeant,' said the shipmaster. He pinched invisible directives with his haptic finger implants.

Servitors and logic engines responded. Watched carefully by the ship's helmsmen, they redirected the *Probity* along the tumbling wreck toward the prow.

'Give me a theoretical, Caias,' said Lethicus.

'Warp outfall. Victim of Geller field failure brought on by engagement damage. The vessel has certainly seen some heavy action. It could be one of the ships from the Word Bearers or World Eaters fleets, a casualty of their attack on Ultramar. The colours are wrong, but that means little now. Or…'

Lethicus drummed his fingers on the rail. He narrowed his eyes. 'Or…'

'It's a trap,' said Caias.

'What then?'

'We should leave,' said Caias. 'There is a sensible practical for you.'

Lethicus snorted. 'If only we could. The craft is drifting but it is possessed of significant

momentum. Furthermore, it is on a direct intercept course for Sotha. At this speed it will arrive within five days.'

'What is the chance of impact upon the planetary surface?' asked Caias.

Vratus' fingers danced over a number of buttons. Her station's cogitators spat out their answers in a string of flaring numbers on the screen. 'Seventy per cent. It is on a direct heading, once gravity forcing is taken into account.'

'Chances of detection?' asked Lethicus.

'If it gets in close, they'll never see it. The Pharos has practically blinded the orbital.'

'Always the Pharos,' said Lethicus.

Vratus nodded. 'Yes, my lord.'

'Xenos tech,' said Caias softly. 'I don't trust it, lighting up the capital for all to see while leaving us blind and itself vulnerable. Makes me feel like a glow worm in a cave full of bats.'

'We have to call it in,' said Lethicus.

'We will not be able to warn the Aegida from here, my lords. Vox at this range is unreliable and astrotelepathy is unworkable in the face of the storm.' Vratus became discomfited. 'Astropath Secondary Kivar is still not well after his last attempt. Shall I ask Mistress Tibanian herself to attempt a communication?'

Lethicus shook his head. 'I'll not risk her mind on a message that won't get through.'

'Kivar then?' said Caias. 'You could ask nicely.'

'We have lost too many astropaths. Kivar is barely sane as it is. We will make all speed for a relay station, and send a boosted vox-message in-system.'

'We could follow the ship in,' said Caias. 'We could go ahead of it, and warn them in person.'

Lethicus stood up and pinched at his chin. 'If this is a deliberate act, whoever set us this little dilemma is clever. They chose this spot, where we are spread thinnest. Theoretical – if we escort this wreck all the way, we will be leaving a big hole in the patrol net. They might be waiting for us to do exactly that, to follow us all the way home themselves.'

'Or they might be hoping we let it slip by while we go and make the call,' said Caias thoughtfully. 'All theoreticals leads to poor practicals. If we board it, we risk attack. If we leave it, we risk allowing infiltration forces in-system.'

'We are carrying a full payload of torpedoes,' said Lethicus.

'Gunnery,' said Caias. 'Can we destroy the vessel?'

'Yes, my lord, but to do so would require the expenditure of the larger part of our ordnance.'

'Then we would be virtually defenceless,' said Caias. 'The *Probity*'s guns are not up to

much.'

'We'd still have our speed,' said Gellius. He was justifiably proud of his nimble ship. 'If we are attacked we can outrun almost anything.'

'Speed is as fine a weapon as a gladius, in the right–' began Caias.

'Apologies, my lord, I have identified the vessel,' interrupted Vratus. 'It is the *Nycton*, Eighth Legion. Last confirmed sighting was at the battle of… "Tsagualsa", in the Thramas Sector. Reported crippled by the First Legion sometime after that, unconfirmed.' She rapidly examined a number of data-feeds. 'All saviour pods and lifeboats appear to have been launched. Nothing but residual power signatures from secondary and tertiary sources. It's dead, my lord.'

'That battle was more than a year ago, and it still bleeds plasma. That is recent damage, or a ploy. I will bet my last bolt shell that there is life in it yet.' Lethicus slammed his hand into the rail with sudden anger. 'Night Lords! I don't like it. There is something wrong with this entire situation. If the *Nycton* had come in on a random tide it should have been picked up by the Mandeville sentry vessels. Gellius, pull us back. Gunnery, formulate a firing solution, minimum ammunition expenditure. Vratus, keep watch. Broad sweep auspex in a full sphere.'

Vratus frowned. 'Sensorium range is restricted to ten thousand kilometres.'

'Execute that order, auspex command. Divert energy from the engines for full signal boost, give Vratus what she needs,' said Gellius. He swallowed specifically, activating the vox-bead embedded in his throat. 'Tech-Adept Mu-Xi 936, prepare the sensorium and auspex suites for full power engagement. Engines dead stop, vector thrusters full. Come about, prow over one-eighty degrees. Half thrust forward, heading three-four-nine by twenty-six. Take us clear of the *Nycton*.'

Bells rang. The engines powered down and the throbbing of the deck plates changed. The *Probity* shook as braking thrusters fired, their discharge misting the oculus with freezing gases. The Ultramarines ship pulled away from the *Nycton*, leaving it to continue its unsteady course towards Sotha.

The *Probity*'s prow swung in a wide arc as she turned amidships. Reactive forces tugged at the crew, at odds with the pull of the grav-plating. Lethicus experienced a brief sensation of falling in two directions at once – then the ship braked and the main engines burned hard again, taking it away from the derelict with a steady acceleration, and the odd sensation disappeared.

They proceeded so for five minutes, the distance between the two vessels growing rapidly.

'Auspex sounding indicates no sign of other vessels,' said Vratus.

'Are you certain?' asked Caias.

'As certain as I can be, my lord, with the interference of the storm.'

'Good enough,' said Caias.

‘It will have to be,’ said Lethicus. ‘Shipmaster, destroy the vessel, then make all haste to the seventh beacon. We will send a report in from there. It is the only way to be sure Sotha will receive our vox-transmission. If we’re being watched, we’re in imminent danger.’

‘As you order, my lord. I advise you that the diversion will take us away from our scheduled patrol route. Vox-communication from the beacon will not reach Sotha for several hours, and it is two days’ sailing to the seventh beacon,’ said Vratus. ‘They will not receive our report for fifty-four hours.

‘Better they receive warning late than never,’ said Lethicus.

‘My lord.’

‘Make all speed. Bring us to battle readiness.’

‘Aye, my lord,’ said Gellius. ‘All hands, prepare for battle. Combat protocols will come into force in forty-five seconds. All hands to stations.’

‘Vratus, send out a message now through the ship’s long-range vox-caster. There is a chance it will get through,’ said Lethicus.

‘Understood.’ Vratus returned to her station.

‘Gellius, I shall leave you to your command without further interference. I thank you for your forbearance.’

‘My lord Lethicus,’ said Gellius. He dipped his head, but did not take his attention from his instruments or his crew.

At a distance of six thousand kilometres from the dead *Nycton*, the *Probity* banked round hard and launched a full spread of torpedoes after the Night Lords wreck. In two groups of three they slid from their tubes, puffs of frozen atmosphere following them out. They spread in a fan. Bright thruster jets burned cleanly against the dirty redness of the Ruinstorm, altering the munitions’ course sharply. Their hugeness gave them an illusion of lumbering elegance, when in truth they could run at a significant proportion of the speed of light.

The second volley of torpedoes was already launching when the first impacted. An overlapping cluster of brilliant spheres burst into existence, winking out almost as quickly. Glowing coronas of debris blasted off from the dead ship. They cooled rapidly, becoming dark shapes that fell away, propelled in every direction by the explosions. The second round of hits followed shortly afterwards, a further blossoming of nuclear fire glaring through the ship’s oculus.

But it wasn’t until the third volley, coming on the heels of the second, that the derelict strike cruiser burst apart into a ball of glowing metal fragments and gases.

The destroyer remained still for a moment, as if it were assessing its own handiwork. Then its single main engine ignited and manoeuvring thrusters jetted hard on the port side. Describing a long parabola, the *Probity* put the Sothan star to its stern and skimmed along the plane of the ecliptic toward the system’s anonymous gas giant, and the vox-relay station situated there.

FOUR

Dark brotherhood
Relay
Ambush

In a dim chamber, thirty-two Night Lords waited. Lost in their own dark thoughts, they sat apart from one another. After fourteen days locked in their armour they had become sullen. They had ceased baiting one another, and their jibes and duels had stopped. An air of boredom hung over the room. The muted lightning patterns of their arco-projectors added an annoying flicker to the dimness. Helm lenses glowed a menacing red, casting the death's heads painted on their faceplates in menacing shadows.

The room had a radius of thirty metres, giving each brother plenty of space to sit alone and cultivate his hatred of his fellows. Several of the Space Marines were nearly catatonic, lost to the quasi-consciousness of catalepsean node sleep. One of them jabbed endlessly at the floor with a serrated knife, scraping a random pattern of violence into the metal.

Gendor Skraivok, claw master of the 45th Company, admired the stoicism of his warriors while it still lasted. He understood their poor humour. They had been promised freedom from a lying Emperor, and instead found themselves prisoners of their own ambitions, locked into ceramite cells aboard a dormant installation at the back end of nowhere. His own suit stank of unwashed skin, recycled air and chemical purifiers. His stomach growled at its emptiness. As it was for him, so it would be for his men.

His was not a happy company. After months aboard their nearly derelict ship the *Umber Prince* at the fringes of the Sothan System, asking them to do this was risky. He needed a success soon.

For what felt like the millionth time the claw master examined the room they were within. He had given up days ago on finding anything new, but it killed the time. The central chamber of the relay station was a tall cylinder bounded by a hollow framework of utilitarian metal girders. The various components of the room were stamped with the Cog Mechanicum with monotonous frequency. A tall, hollow column occupied the centre of the room. Both walls and column were festooned with endless bundles of wires and optics bunched together with metal clasps, each twisted seal also stamped with the mark of the Mechanicum. Lights winked at random, like the eyes of mechanical vermin skulking in an undergrowth of cables.

The organised chaos of the mechanisms managed to be both fussily neat and bewildering messy.

Catwalks circled the second and third levels, one walkway around the outer walls and a second embracing the machine column. Ladders in tubular cages linked the levels together. Four work stations were set around the column on each level. These were virtually unusable, being studded with data-tether ports, optical transmitters and other means of transference suited only to those physically adapted to make use of them. There

were display screens, but they were crude. This was a facility serviced by tech-adepts and idiot-machines. They were in the domain of the Machine-God, and there was no consideration for those who were not his disciples. Even atmosphere was a temporary concession to life, sucked away into bottles when the station was empty. Five slaved servitors ran the place, their limbless torsos housed in condensation-streaked life-support coffins tucked away deep in the forest of wires.

There was no air, no gravity, and little light. When they had arrived, Skraivok had ordered his men to leave the station as it was, wary that cycling up its limited life-support capabilities would trip some hidden alarm and alert the station's masters to their presence.

Sound tactical reasoning, if not a popular move. The resentment of his warriors was building up as surely as the reek in his battleplate.

This was not how it was supposed to be, convincing men who would have once followed him without question to do his bidding. They were supposed to be free. His mind drifted. He imagined himself in a galaxy without Imperial command, where he might use his legionary's gifts for his own ends and not thanklessly fighting until he perished to fulfil the ambition of the distant Emperor. He imagined himself a king, worshipped by a fearful populace. It was a fine thought, and he struggled to fight off a hundred counter-images that showed him cast down by his slaves, or killed in Horus' war, or knifed by an underling before he could leave this forsaken place.

Always, the negativity of the Legion polluted his thoughts.

A vox-click interrupted his ruminations, and he was glad of it.

'Claw master, the Thirteenth Legion are coming.'

'Finally!' said Skraivok with unguarded relief. The others came to slow and surly life.

'I was beginning to think they hadn't taken the bait.'

'You doubted my plan, Kellendvar?'

Skraivok's headsman shrugged, his auto-reactive shoulder plates whining softly as they accommodated the movement. 'You have been wrong before.'

'Not often, headsman.'

To Skraivok's chagrin, Kellendvar's unstable brother chose to join their conversation.

'After our stranding, I would have thought you were tired of waiting hopelessly in the dark, Skraivok. Ambush is the province of the cowardly hunter,' said Kellenkir. 'We should attack directly, and bring our wrath upon Ultramar in open war. Let us strike terror into the heart of Guilliman's petty kingdom!'

Skraivok made a sound of annoyance and turned pointedly away from Kellenkir to address Kellendvar. 'Kellendvar, do not let my fondness for you blind you to my concern for Kellenkir's attitude. I will not tolerate insolence, especially not in the face of certain victory. Keep control of your brother. I will not lay out our plan again for him.'

'Two weeks in total vacuum has put him in a foul mood,' said Kellendvar. 'I'm not

particularly energised by the experience either.'

'Perhaps you should remind him that the only way we are leaving this station is by taking that ship.'

Kellenkir grunted dismissively. 'Certain victory? Such faith Lord Krukesh has in you. Such faith you have in yourself.'

'We will attack openly, Kellenkir,' said Skraivok, 'and bring upon Guilliman's pocket empire a reign of terror that will make us princes of every world we survey, but we will do it in a manner that does not end with our immediate annihilation! We must take their beacon from them. And to do that, we must seize the Sothan orbital platform. The first step on the road to victory is the taking of that ship. And we will seize that vessel, do you understand? You are a warrior worthy of the most dreadful epithets, Kellenkir, and my hatred of you is outweighed twice over by my appreciation of your talents. But you lack subtlety. Do not question me again.'

Skraivok pointedly strode towards the column in the centre of the room. Situated at the heart of the station was a magnificent communications array that the Ultramarines were using to boost their vox-signals to levels that could be heard over the roar of the storm. His communications officer Gallivar was something of a perfectionist, and he had stood stoically in position for the whole deployment by one of the stations, the bulky comms unit of his modified armour attached to the communications core by a snaking cable. In front of him was a green-glowing phosphor screen. A streaky dot moved across the flickering image towards the steadier blob of the station indicator at the centre. Both were marked with identifying datascreed.

'The *Probity*, Venom-class destroyer. A perfect target,' said Skraivok. 'I do believe things are going our way. Berenon, what does the future hold?'

Berenon squatted away from the others, his head bowed. His shoulder pad was marked with the horned skull of the old Librarius. The grisly trophies that adorned the suits of his fellows were absent from his armour. When he lifted his head he did so slowly, as if it weighed a great deal.

'The disturbance of the empyrean is heavy on me. I see moments, nothing more. I can give you no firm answer, my lord.'

'What do you see? Tell me.'

'I see moments of victory, I see aeons of defeat,' Berenon intoned wearily. 'Defeat follows victory, always.'

'So all know. Death waits for every being, and will not be denied. But tell me, will we prevail today, brother?' said Skraivok, striving for patience in the face of Berenon's dolefulness.

He had some sympathy. Besides their innate cynicism, many of the Night Lords were troubled by ominous dreams. From the moment of their induction as legionaries, visions of dark futures tormented them all at one time or another. These were not simply a relic of their troubled lives, but a gift of their accursed primarch. Berenon was a true psyker, and

so suffered dire precognitions all the more severely. The Edict of Nikaea had been patchily applied across the Night Lords Legion, depending entirely on the whim of each expedition's legionary commander. Skraivok's overlord, Regent Jukeresh the Strong, had enacted it fully. But Jukeresh was long dead, and no command of the Emperor had any power over the Legion any more. Berenon had been forced unwillingly back into his role by Skraivok.

'We will prevail today, claw master, although only failure awaits us ultimately if we follow this course of action,' he said.

'Ha! There is no point to this charade! You should have left me aboard the *Nycton*, brother,' scoffed Kellenkir.

'Silence, Kellenkir. One moment you wish immediate action, the next none,' snapped Skraivok. 'If we had let you be, murdering the *Nycton*'s miserable serfs, then you too would be dead.'

Kellenkir swaggered dangerously over to Skraivok and jabbed a metal-clad finger into his lord's breastplate. 'I do not care. Do you understand? I wish to fight, and to kill. Life is misery, death is peace. I would teach this lesson to all before my own end comes. Pain can show them. They all beg for death before I am done. There is nothing else.' This last he said with such desolation his brother went to his side and placed a hand on his forearm. Kellenkir shrugged it off.

'Have you finished?' said Skraivok. Kellenkir growled and stepped back. 'Good. Kellenkir, Kellendvar. Get into position. There will be plenty of opportunity for slaughter should you perform your role properly.'

Kellenkir pushed his way wordlessly out of the room, six Night Lords following him. Kellendvar made to go, but Skraivok halted him with a private vox-click.

'Your brother risks our lives, Kellendvar. How long will you vouch for him?'

'He is my birth-brother and my battle-brother,' said Kellendvar. 'How long do you think?'

'There is no room for sentimentality in what we do, Kellendvar.'

'If there is not room even for the bond of blood and gang, what is there?' said the headsman bitterly. 'I will not subscribe to my brother's nihilism nor to your reactionary whims. To me there is more than death.'

'His lack of control is a threat.'

'And he will come out of it!' said Kellendvar harshly.

'Do not be sure of that,' said Skraivok. 'The galaxy is broken, and will not be fixed. How do you suppose a single man might mend himself when all descends into chaos?'

'Claw master? They are nearly here,' interrupted Berenon. Kellendvar took the opportunity to depart after his brother, his great power axe over his shoulder.

'I am done with your gifts, Librarian,' said Skraivok. He was more forgiving of Berenon

than Kellenkir. The Librarian's manner belied his effectiveness. In combat he fought with immense savagery, driven by his desire to wash his own doom-laden visions away in a tide of blood.

Skraivok returned his attention to the screens, examining what little other data was available to him beyond the esoteric sightings of Berenon. The craft approached quickly, no preceding messages but a constant stream of data-clasps seeking out a response from the machineries of the station.

'The Thirteenth are as predictable as always. They attempt to link with the station's main relay. Ready the recording, Gallivar.'

'Yes, claw master.'

Skraivok opened a wide vox-channel to the members of his company spread throughout the relay station. 'Attention, my mighty Forty-Fifth. The bookkeepers of Macragge approach. Once the false vox-net is activated, I will have total vox-silence from all units. There will be no mercy for those who disobey. The success of our mission is dependent upon it. Any man breaking this order will answer first to me, then to Kellendvar's axe.'

Affirmations came through his helm link, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

'Then stand ready. Vox-break in three minutes. All armour systems to passive.'

Around the central nexus, Skraivok's men came to life. They stood slowly, gathering up their boltguns, bolt pistols, swords and chainglaives. Those who had put themselves under their catalepsean nodes shook off the lingering effects of the unsleeping.

Skraivok watched them carefully, this coterie of murderers. Bones and chains rattled against their power armour. The warriors in the room represented the best Skraivok had, or those he least distrusted, at any rate. Trust was in short supply in their fragmented Legion. For the time being, the command structure of his depleted company held, but the native traits of the Nostramans were reasserting themselves in the absence of their primarch, and a street ganger's desire for personal dominance made for fractious relations. The arrival of Krukesh the Pale's fleet at Sotha had saved them from a slow death aboard their crippled ship, but it presented Skraivok with as many problems as it had solved. Krukesh could and frequently did overrule Skraivok – there were several other captains of his eminence under the Kyroptera lord, and Skraivok's own men measured him against them. On the other hand, Krukesh's appearance was a reminder of the bonds of the wider Legion and had shored up his strained authority, forestalling the growing mood of rebellion.

But rejoining the Legion had reminded them that Skraivok could be removed by other means than murder. Krukesh and Skraivok despised each other with mutual intensity. There were half a dozen claw leaders who were eyeing his position. Many of his warriors held him personally responsible for getting them stranded at the Sothan rendezvous point in the first place. All this led Skraivok to believe that the Legion was done, despite Krukesh's insistence he was out to reunite it. The cracks were already there. The likes of Krukesh were doing their best to reunite the Legion in the wake of the Thramas Crusade, but Skraivok felt that First Captain Sevatar's ploy of splitting the fleet to save it from the

Dark Angels would only hasten the fragmentation of the Night Lords into petty warbands. Krukesh's own naked ambition was proof of that. They were all living on borrowed time.

It was only with a great and considered effort of will that Skraivok was able to turn his back on any of his brothers.

'Brother Gallivar, activate vox-thieves.'

Gallivar sent a command into the station's machines with a thought.

From all over the station, hidden voxmitters began to transmit a carefully orchestrated web of recorded vox-chatter, a facsimile of squad traffic. Skraivok had spent a great deal of time and effort staging this deceit. Coded Nostraman battle talk sounded out from three locations. He listened a moment, checking one final time that it sounded like a small, desperate force lacking enough discipline to hide themselves well.

Satisfied, he brought up his mission chronometer. 'Commence mission mark on three, two, one – mark.'

In each faceplate of his company, red counters blinked into life, flashed twice, turned green, and began ticking upwards.

Skraivok shut down his company's vox-channels. His warriors retreated to the shadows, their footsteps muted upon the deck. As commanded, his men deactivated their armour's systems, their marker beacons, squad links and data-feeds. The legionary signifiers displayed on Skraivok's visor went out in a flurry of red warning signs, as if his warriors had died together in some cataclysmic storm of fire. Skraivok silenced the resulting alarms.

They hid themselves well in the station's cluttered interior. Their arco-lightning flickered out and the dull glow of their helmet lenses faded like dying embers as they powered their armour down to essential functions only.

All connection to Skraivok's brothers ceased. He imagined them muttering to themselves about his adherence to old legionary practices such as the mission mark. But without that scrim of discipline, he was nothing.

Skraivok was left only with his breathing, the hum of his power pack and the quiet whine of his armour's systems.

Each one of them was now totally alone, islands of engineered flesh and ceramite in the coldness of space.

Everything would come down to timing and the initiative of his men. Against xenos warriors and breakaway human civilisations, this plan would have surely worked. Many such actions had. But there was one very large difference today, and it troubled Skraivok's plans with many unknown variables.

They were fighting Ultramarines.

FIVE

Boarding actions
Ambush
Brothers in blood

The *Probity* decelerated and approached Relay Station Seven at a cautious speed.

On hololithic projections the station looked like a spindle. Long antennae protruded upwards and downwards from the domed cap of the central communications housing. Lights blinked at the antennae's furthest extremities and the grim skull and cog of the Mechanicum glared at them from the smooth station roof. The underside was a ribbed mass of heat exchange vanes and attitude thruster ports. The antennae stretched in excess of the length of the *Probity*, but the station's total mass was much less.

According to schema Vratus had retrieved from the ship's data stores, the central portion consisted of a hollow shaft through which the antennae passed. Where the station thickened into a disc there were three decks of chambers, crammed with machinery, sleeving the shaft. Four radial corridors gave access to the rooms on each deck. Access between them was granted by ladders at each corridor's extremity and by a single cargo elevator platform which ran up the outside of the central shaft. A separate docking ring circled the station below the main communications centre, held out on four spokes. Two of the airlocks were large cargo points protruding on extensor corridors at opposite sides. Two smaller docking couplings occupied the other facings.

With astropathic communication virtually impossible in the face of the storm and vox-traffic disrupted, many of these unmanned posts had been set up in Ultramar, acting as signal gain boosters for ship communications. The messages sent between vessels travelled only at the speed of light, but it was better than nothing.

'I am still unable to connect a data tether with the communications nexus,' said Vratus. 'The returns show all signs of a malfunction.'

'The cause is no malfunction,' said Lethicus. 'It is sabotage.'

'Wait a moment, my lord.' She consulted her feeds. 'I have found something. Very faint.' Vratus altered the settings on her station. 'I am picking up vox-traffic from within the station.'

'Route it through the bridge emitters.'

Vratus did as she was asked. Coded vox-signals blurted onto the command deck.

'Squad traffic,' said Caias.

'Can you unscramble it?'

'They are not using a standard encryption, my lord.'

They listened a few moments to the back and forth of voxmissions. They were infrequent

and hurried.

'They are trying to be quiet,' said Caias.

'Not quiet enough,' said Lethicus. 'Where are their damn ships?'

'There is nothing on the auspex, my lord,' said Vratus.

'What is that? There is something docked there,' said Caias. He pointed at an object attached to the station's docking ring, made of the same dull grey metal as the relay. 'Looks like a saviour pod. Theoretical – survivors from the *Nycton*?'

'Possibly,' said Lethicus.

'Their course would have brought them within distance of this station, my lords,' said the helmsman.

'I count seven different vox-sources,' said Caias. 'Survivors, surely. Allow me to expand my theoretical – survivors from the Thramas Crusade are drawn to the Pharos. Their ship makes the translation, but is virtually non-functional. A handful of legionaries escape, and make their way to the nearest transmission source hoping to signal their fellows for rescue. They discover Relay Station Seven. Imagine how disappointed they must have been. They have probably been trapped there for weeks.'

'Theoretical – the Night Lords are low-born, criminal scum, and they're playing us for fools,' said Lethicus.

'I counter your theoretical. I say they are desperate. They want our ship. How else are they going to survive? A saviour pod carries twenty legionaries at best. Their vox-traffic suggests far fewer. They have their backs to the wall.'

Lethicus shook his bald head. 'There is too much supposition in your theoretical.'

'It is the obvious reading.'

'That is what worries me, Caias.'

'Either way, brother-sergeant, our practical remains the same – board the station and kill them all. We cannot leave them there.'

'That is so, brother,' said Lethicus reluctantly. 'Gellius, bring us in. We shall dock. Caias, take four of our brothers around the back of the station, come in from the rearmost airlock. Let us see them try to catch us unawares when we come at them from two directions.'

Caias grinned. 'We float for Macragge.'

Lethicus scowled at him. Caias' humour was sometimes unbefitting for a member of the XIII Legion, and his levity grated on Lethicus' more sober sensibilities. 'Just get over there, and be ready to attack when I command.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant,' said Caias.

There were twenty warriors in Squad Lethicus. Fifteen of them waited in the main cargo lock for the *Probity* to dock with Relay Station Seven. Lethicus wasn't taking any chances, and had ordered portable fire shields arrayed at the back of the docking bay to

face the wide, toothed doors. Behind these the Ultramarines waited, guns trained on the cargo portal. Five of them, Lethicus included, carried curved breaching shields: tall slabs of plasteel decorated with Legion, squad and company markings. Notches in the sides allowed them to use their weapons without exposing themselves.

Lethicus checked and rechecked the feeds from his men's war-plate, then reduced their signifiers to single-point icons to clear his view. The ship made gentle, tiny lurches as manoeuvring jets jiggled it into position. There came a larger movement, an arresting of motion, and a clang that ran through the hull.

'*We are docked, my lord*,' said Shipmaster Gellius over the vox. A yellow warning light spun around above the doors, making the hazard striping painted around them flicker.

'Stand ready,' said Lethicus. The airlock's extraction fans roared as the *Probity* matched the vacuum on the other side of the door. The red lights delimiting the airlock's atmospheric integrity field winked out.

His men racked their boltguns, and aimed at the doors.

'We do not know what awaits us. Do not trust to your theoreticals of the situation. Be wary of false practicals. We fight our own kind, and the Night Lords do not fight cleanly. Do not forget it.'

Many in the 199th Company had not yet engaged fellow Legiones Astartes in combat. Lethicus was not among them, having fought in three actions during the Shadow Crusade, but over half his warriors were about to face this challenge for the first time.

The depressurisation wind slackened. Sound became tinny, then died. All aural input came via vox or was transmitted through the metal of his armour.

'Open the doors,' ordered Lethicus.

A klaxon honked loudly as the doors drew back from each other. Residual atmosphere flash-froze on the metal teeth.

'Ready,' said Lethicus. 'Ready…'

The doors clunked back into their housing.

There was nothing on the far side.

An extensible corridor forty metres long, long enough to keep supply vessels clear of the station, led to a set of inner blast doors. Slit windows down the sides showed the storm on one side, the deep night of intergalactic space on the other. The lumen strips were out, and bars of stormlight provided ruby blocks of illumination.

'Breaching squad, with me,' said Lethicus. 'Sub-group two, follow and cover.'

The breaching sub-squad formed up in front of the fire shields. Lethicus and two others carried boltguns, the remaining pair lascutters. At Lethicus' order they brought their breaching shields together and advanced out of the *Probity* in lockstep.

Lethicus' boots maglocked to the surface as he stepped over the door housing and into

the docking sleeve. There was no gravity active within the station.

'Sub-group two, follow. Sub-group three, cover our advance.' Lethicus made no effort to mask his vox for the time being. Let the traitors know they were coming.

They advanced to the sleeve's inner door. Attempts to open it were unsuccessful, and Lethicus motioned the lascutters to work. Dazzling flashes flooded the corridor as intense, short-range coherent light sawed through the plasteel. Lethicus' auto-senses darkened his helm lenses, rendering the red-lit corridor sinister. Gobbets of molten metal rolled and beaded atop one another as the Space Marines worked their tools down the door.

When they were three-quarters of the way through, Lethicus sent a coded signal to Caias. He received swift acknowledgment – three random blurts against the growl of the storm's interference.

The lascutters snapped off. Brother Marbullo put his foot on the door. Lethicus nodded.

With a power-assisted kick, the breached airlock door fell inwards, bouncing off the floor and hitting the wall with a thump the Space Marines felt through their boots.

Lethicus reached through and shoved the floating door down.

The inner ring corridor was dark and empty.

'Move on,' said Lethicus. 'Quickly.'

Squad Lethicus exited the docking sleeve and jogged their way down the main radial corridor of Relay Station Seven. There the fifteen of them divided into fire teams, Lethicus and the breaching squad taking point position as they approached the elevator. The others covered their comrades' advance smoothly, using the bulky reinforcing stanchions of the corridor as cover.

Sergeant Lethicus kept a wary eye on his squad's auto-senses input. So far there was no sign of the enemy. The vox-traffic had abruptly silenced as they had docked, short, nervy bursts coming thereafter. Lethicus hoped that Caias was right, and that there were only a few of the traitors aboard the station. If the obvious theoretical were the correct one then the enemy had been blind to their approach until the last minute, and were now deep in hiding.

They reached a chamber highlighted on Lethicus' helm display as the origin of some of the vox-signals. Two Space Marines took up station either side of the door, Lethicus using battlesigns to order the door breached. The bulkhead was heavy, and took as long for the lascutters to cut through as the inner airlock had.

They heaved it aside while its edges still glowed with heat.

'Clear!' shouted Lethicus. He tossed in a couple of grenades. No air meant a minimal shockwave, but the explosion was fiercer than Lethicus expected, battering him with debris and flames that died as soon as they were born. He put up his breaching shield and threw himself in immediately in their wake.

He covered every angle with his gun as he entered. His fellows came after him. The

grenades had torn holes in the walls. In the rents, ruptured optic bundles glowed like subterranean worms.

'There's no one here, sergeant.'

Lethicus let his shield drop a fraction, then fully. 'Our grenade didn't do that. That's a crater from an anti-personnel mine,' he said, pointing to a circular wound in the wall.

'Sergeant.' Brother Tilus motioned with his bolter.

Lethicus looked down. A severed head was wired to the floor. Mortal. It had taken damage from the blast, but enough remained to show that the skin had been flayed off prior to that, leaving a bloody mess of banded muscle and exposed teeth. The eyes remained, lidless and staring up with a terror that would never end. Part of a helm's vox-mechanisms were wrapped around the skull.

'A trap,' Lethicus said. 'A remote vox-relay. We will start in the centre, and work our way outwards. From now on, ignore all intelligence as to the enemy's location unless you can verify it first-hand.'

Lethicus' coded order chimed in Caias' helmet. With a bound he led his sub-squad off the crenellated spine of the *Probity*. He experienced a fleeting thrill as looked downward into endless nothingness. Below the galactic plane the storm attenuated, and the stars glowed through its violent shrouds. The fringes of the galaxy were at his feet, the last few systems straggling into the incomprehensible infinities of the universe.

After all that Caias had seen and done in his life, it still amazed him to think that the brightest of those lights were distant galaxies. This far out in the east there were many to see. Caias wondered what wars raged there, if there was peace to be found anywhere at all. If brother could turn on brother as they had in the Imperium, he seriously doubted it. His propensity to make light of all things annoyed Lethicus, but it hid a great sorrow that the long stretches of forever held only war.

The dream of the Imperium was dead.

His auto-senses described an environment inimical to life. Outside of his battleplate he had a greater chance of surviving hard vacuum than a standard human, but it was still barely a chance. They had to cross the gulf between ship and station quickly. A mental command swivelled his backpack's stabilisation nozzles backwards. Another sent a hiss of gas from each that propelled him across the narrow gap to the station. Using the nozzles as manoeuvring jets, Caias' squad flew carefully across the void. All Caias' group wore Mark III plate with void harnesses. Even so, the spacing between the nozzles on that particular variant's power pack was not the most ideal for hard void work, and he regretted the limited range of equipment kept on ships the size of *Probity*.

The station appeared much bigger from outside than it had through the oculus. The antennae stretched out so far they became distorted by perspective. The pale plates of the main hull, so delicate-seeming before, became huge slabs tinted red by the warpstorm.

'This is taking too long,' he said to himself.

Caias let out another burst of gas from his backpack, lending him a dangerous speed. They were heading for the main segment. The interior there was far more expansive than that of the docking ring or central shaft, and densely packed with mechanisms. Detection was therefore less likely. As he raced towards the station he brought his feet up a moment before he hit. Impact shock reverberated around his armour as his boots connected. His mass wished to continue its movement, and he swayed, but held position, maglocking himself into place. His brothers joined him, all of them gaining firm footholds. The long corridor to the *Probity* where Lethicus advanced stretched out beneath them. Their destination was elsewhere.

Caias pulled his bolter from his thigh and directed his warriors forward. Secrecy was of the essence, and he dared not use the vox. Moving as stealthily as they could, they made their way around the station's exterior to the far side. There was no damage, he noted. Whatever their enemy had done to sabotage the station's relay was internal. If the traitors had intended to call for help, he could not formulate a theoretical that would make it advantageous for them to knock out the main emitter.

Lethicus' misgivings began to trouble him.

Secreted high up on the antennae of the station, Kellenkir watched a small group of Ultramarines exit an armoured hatch on the spine of their vessel. There were five of them, a paltry number, yet among the immensity of the *Probity*'s dorsal armaments their foe appeared oddly large. Blocky figures, as square as industrial units, and huge. Why had it taken so long for the scales to fall from his eyes? Nothing like that could be called human. They were no longer men at all, but something far worse.

'We are machines in the manufactories of war,' hissed Kellenkir.

'What?' said Kellendvar irritably.

'A thought.'

'Then silence your thoughts, brother, you risk betraying our presence. The ambush will be ruined.' Kellendvar squatted on a thick plasteel band binding the antennae array together. His head was level with Kellenkir's boots. It would be a small thing for Kellenkir to reach down and bury his combat blade in his neck. Mark IV armour was so vulnerable that way. He imagined the grind of the point as it parted the metallised seal, the change in pressure as it pierced flesh and parted bone. It would be a mercy to end him. He should have done it long ago. The thought had crossed his mind many, many times. Daily when they had lived in terror of the meat gangs of the deeper darks of Nostramo, and despair had its claws in him.

He had not killed his little brother then. He could not do it now. Kellenkir examined his reasoning dispassionately. There was no good purpose in staying his hand. No matter what either of them did, his brother would suffer as all thinking creatures must. They had suffered so much, and still Kellendvar did not see. Perhaps, one day, Kellenkir would teach him the truth. It would be a mercy.

Fratricide darted from his mind, back to its hiding place in the dark of his soul.

‘They cannot hear us,’ said Kellenkir with chilling certainty. ‘Why must we keep up this pretence of soldiering? I am a hunter, and I know when my prey cannot see me.’

The warriors hidden around them stirred at the breach in vox-protocol.

‘You risk angering Skraivok.’

‘Damn him,’ growled Kellenkir. ‘He cannot hear us. He is a coward, a painted popinjay noble’s brat, beholden to rules that no longer have relevance. Who is he to order one such as I? A dandy of the high families, born with a golden spoon in his mouth and a steel blade in his hand. He thinks himself our master. I could break him without a second thought. We pulled our way up hand over bloody hand from the depths of the night. When has he tested his mettle?’

‘In a hundred campaigns, brother. He is a worthy lord.’

‘There are no worthy lords!’ scoffed Kellenkir. ‘Listen to yourself, dogging his footsteps like a beaten cur hopeful of a kind hand. We have no allegiances. If we can break with the Emperor we can break with any. No command has any meaning. Skraivok has no authority over me.’

‘He is your master,’ said Kellendvar. The reflected turmoil of the Ruinstorm curled across the curved planes of his war-plate.

Kellenkir smiled at the undoing of order he saw within.

‘Death is my master,’ he said.

There was a gentle pop in Kellenkir’s ear as Kellendvar switched to a private vox-channel.

‘Why are you this way? What has got into you? You have become bitter, brother. We are free! Can you not revel in that sensation? We were taken from our home, used as tools for the ambition of a man from a distant world. But He misjudged us. The gifts He gave us are ours to use as we see fit. We shall be princes, you and I, and live a fine life! We will be masters, not slaves.’

Kellenkir laughed unpleasantly. ‘The Night Haunter has taught you nothing. There is no such thing as triumph. The primarch knows it to be an illusion – a cruel trick played by death to make us despair when our works come tumbling down around us. Death enjoys our suffering. The finer the life, the greater the anguish when its glories are revealed as false. A golden palace will not stop the creep of decay. No fortress wall is proof against those who would destroy you. If the first one thousand of your enemies fail to take your life, one will succeed. You have always seen a pattern to the universe. The Imperial Truth, the metronome of cause and effect. Lies! The truth of the world is out there, in the storm. It is chaos.’

‘You speak of death as if it is a god.’

‘Oh, little brother, the Imperial Truth contained so many lies. There *are* gods. Look into the storm, and you will see their faces.’

‘I do not care for such gods, if they exist,’ said Kellendvar. ‘They have dominion only over the hopeless, over the weak and those who whine about their fate. They have no hold over the strong. Let the Word Bearers chant and rave. I will live by my own talents.’

‘Death cares neither for gods nor men, nor their talents, brother. He will bring them all low in time.’

Kellendvar turned his face upwards. His lenses were gloomy blood-glows peering from the death’s head painted on his helm. Kellenkir caught a hint of eyes behind the armourglass, but otherwise the humanity of the man before him was entirely occluded.

He sensed his brother’s childish plea nonetheless.

‘Why did you give up?’ said Kellendvar.

It was the hopelessness of it that got at Kellenkir. He remembered little of his time before their induction to the Legion. Days of hiding and nights of blood, forever at the mercy of the strong – there was nothing there he wished to recall. But the rhythms of survival, the relentless horror of their day-to-day life, remained with him. He had a flash of Kellendvar as he had once been; a defiant, dirty child, starved to the point of emaciation, and utterly dependent on his older sibling.

Love was the greatest weakness of all, for it was that which stayed Kellenkir’s hand. Kellenkir’s mind bit at itself in vexation. He betrayed none of it.

Kellenkir broke eye contact. He looked down the length of the antennae at the figures crawling over the curved dome of the station until they disappeared from view.

‘Never say that to me again,’ Kellenkir said. ‘I have not given up. I see the truth, but I will not go easily. I have many lessons to teach, my brother, and will enlighten as many as I can before death takes me.’

Kellendvar ignored him.

‘They are out of sight,’ said Kellendvar. ‘We go now.’

Caias motioned for his men to stop. They drew up beside him and he pointed downward. They were now above one of the smaller docking ports, on the opposite side to the Night Lords saviour pod. They walked under the lip of the main structure then down the side of the central shaft.

The lesser docking ports were closer in to the station than the cargo ports. Designed for ship’s barques and lighters, the port below them had a minimal docking sleeve that stuck only a few metres out from the ring. Caias signalled to Brother Rovarius. The Space Marine maglocked his bolter to one leg and retrieved a melta bomb from his chest. He walked past his brothers, and placed the fusion device in the centre of the doors. Caias and his brothers took a few steps backward. Arming lights on the bomb blinked with increasing rapidity until they shone solidly, and it detonated. The miniature fusion generator enclosed in its shell activated for its first and final time, coring the door. Spheres of cooling metal gas drifted away from the station.

Caias’ group went to the airlock. Caias himself pushed wide the wrecked doors and

scanned the room. ‘Clear,’ he said.

A huge detonation burst through from the docking ring, blasting the port’s inner doors outward in a shower of sharp metal. His men cried out as they were hit. Caias was caught in the chest. His armour’s alarms clamoured as his suit was breached.

The force of the blast sent him away from the station, jets of white air setting him spinning until they were arrested by hardening foam sealant spilling from the gap. He stabilised himself, but was seriously wounded – a half-metre metal splinter jutted out through the plastron of his armour, and he was falling away from the station. The icons for his four men were all red, except one. Colobus still lived, but not for long. He clawed at his throat, tumbling out of control. Maenas had been cut in half by the explosion. The two halves of his body spun away from each other. His other two brothers he saw no sign of.

Colobus’ frantic scrabbling ceased. He sailed away from the relay station into the void. Light caught the hard edges of his armour, then he vanished into the shadow of the station.

His icon blinked, and turned red.

Caias let out a puff of gas from his nozzles, wincing as the motion tugged at his wound. He turned back to look at the docked destroyer. A line of figures were moving over from the station towards the spine.

‘Gellius, hear me, you have boarders inbound.’

Vox-static sounded harshly in his ears. Blinking lights on his helm display indicated active jamming.

He looked down at the metal protruding from his chest.

Slowly, he grasped it and with a roar of pain wrenched it free. The ragged edges of it scraped painfully on his breached rib cage. Bright globs of blood followed it.

Shuddering with the pain, Caias cast the splinter aside. He almost passed out from the agony, but his war-plate responded, his pharmacopia flooding him with anaesthetics. Still leaking blood and air, he steadied himself. He gritted his teeth, set his nozzles to maximum thrust, and went after the Night Lords boarders.

SIX

A trap sprung
Joy in death
Taking *Probity*

Skraivok watched from behind a bundle of cables. His fake vox-links sent panicked messages in the background. The Ultramarines had been ignoring them for the last few minutes. He had expected this, but the fake vox-net had done its job, luring the arrogant sons of Guilliman into his trap.

The Ultramarines were communicating on encrypted squad channels. It was nothing that Gallivar could not circumvent. The first rule of terror was knowing more than the enemy. To this end the Night Lords had more than their fair share of brothers skilled in communications. Gallivar breached the cypher and opened the Ultramarines' communications. Vox-feed and squad datalinks poured into Skraivok's helmet. He could not induce terror in the warriors of Ultramar, but their tense vox-exchanges told him that they were on edge.

And so they should be, he thought.

He waited with the utmost of confidence. His earlier concerns were forgotten for the moment. He was fully immersed in the game.

The Ultramarines approached the central chamber. A blue-clad warrior came in cautiously, a sergeant's markings on his armour, and a breaching shield gripped in one hand. He covered the room expertly with his gun, seeking his enemy but finding none.

Four more Ultramarines stepped into the room after their leader, breaching shields raised. They were as smooth and methodical as their reputation suggested.

Skraivok trusted to the interference given out by the cables he hid within to mask his presence, but no matter how skilful this ambush, it was going to be costly.

'Standard spread. Sub-squad one, cover left, two, cover right,' voxed their sergeant. 'Keep them back around the curve of the corridor. Keep them back from the elevator.' Skraivok smiled at this sergeant's certainty – Lethicus was his name, according to the squad – so pompous and sure of himself. He was oblivious to his enemy listening in.

'Bring up the auspex. Get me a full sweep of this room.'

Another Ultramarine came in through the door, the forearm of his armour bulky with an integrated auspex unit. So this was their Gallivar. He would be no match for his own vox-master, Skraivok was sure. The auspex warrior's brothers sheltered him behind their shields as he scanned the room.

The station rumbled – the explosives Skraivok's warriors had set in the far docking portal had been activated. Chatter from the XIII told of their increasing alarm. Skraivok was delighted. It was all he could do not to burst out laughing. He was reminded of his time

back on Nostramo, lurking in the dark waiting for his victims. He had grown bored of hunting the poor and begun to prey on other nobles' sons and daughters. He had never thought to experience that pleasure of hunting one's own kind again.

'What was that?' one of the XIII said.

'Hold firm. If they're anywhere, they're in here.'

'I'm getting no readings, sergeant. Nothing but the energy patterns of the station.' The babble of an active scan warbled in Skraivok's vox-pickup. 'Wait, I have a tightbeam link,' said the auspex operator. 'The main systems have been compromised. We have an intruder. Datalink origin is within this room.'

Their leader cursed with a fluency that surprised Skraivok. *Not so pure after all,* he thought, *but then, nobody is*.

'They could be staring right at us.'

'We are,' said Skraivok on broadcast vox. He was gratified to see the Ultramarines react in alarm.

The station erupted into a blaze of activity. Unit icons blinked into life in Skraivok's helmet as his men revealed themselves. They burst out from tangles of wire, boltguns blazing. The first of the breaching squad went down, spun around by the force of an impact to his neck. His blood misted the vacuum, drifting as a red cloud of ice globules. He remained standing, maglocked to the floor. The others weren't so easily caught. The Ultramarines reacted quickly, forming up around their specialist with shields up, and returned fire with brutal efficiency.

Vox-channels burst into frantic life as both sides dropped all attempts at secrecy. Orders and status reports flew between squads. Skraivok received notifications from his warriors as they attacked the Ultramarines from both sides of the circular corridor outside. Muzzle flash and propellant burn lit up the darkness. A plasma beam from Skraivok's squad blazed through one shield, but the warrior behind was unharmed. There were four Night Lords on the lowest level; two of them were dropped in short order. The remaining pair retreated behind the communications column, trading inaccurate bursts with the Ultramarines in the doorway.

'Throne! Forty-six hostile contacts confirmed and rising!' shouted one of the Ultramarines.

'Raise the *Probity*!'

'Our vox is being jammed!'

'Get out! Get out! Get out!' yelled their sergeant.

Boltgun fire from the catwalks clanged off the tall breaching shields, the bolts exploding against the metal or embedding themselves in the soft guts of the station, tearing the mechanisms to shreds. The light from a dozen miniature explosions strobed the room. Shrapnel peppered pipes. Clouds of gas roared from pressurised storage, filling the room with a fog of frozen air.

Another Night Lord was hit square in the chest. The bolt penetrated deep with him, blowing out his lungs. He fell back with a bubbling cry, bouncing around the central shaft in the microgravity. Skraivok lost some of his good humour. The Ultramarines were defying the odds.

The breaching squad disengaged from their dead brother. They closed shields again, and retreated out of the door with an infuriating cool.

'Claw One, crush them!' yelled Skraivok. He emerged from his hiding place, and looked down from the catwalk at the chamber floor.

Six dead Night Lords to one dead Ultramarine. Pathetic.

He slammed his hand onto his volkite serpenta pistol and pulled it free. He turned to the warrior nearest him, ready to order him down onto the first level to engage in close. The words never made it to his lips. A cluster of grenades detonated in the centre of chamber. Sparks fountained everywhere as the central data conduit was hit. Skraivok was slammed backwards as the room filled with short-lived fire and spinning, razor-sharp shrapnel.

He picked himself up. His helm display was compromised, the screed on it jumping into incomprehensible smears, but he was unhurt.

'Someone start killing those bastards, now!'

Lethicus heard the explosions of the grenades as quiet, flat noises in the thickening air. A spray of debris blasted out of the central chamber, hammering into the backs of his men. The gunfire from within ceased, leaving them a few precious moments to deal with Night Lords bracketing them at either end of the curving corridor. The atmospheric stores of the station were breached, filling it with air. Sound became louder, and Lethicus became aware of the wail of sirens. Lights flashed over doors. His men fired their guns on automatic, casting out a wall of death that kept the enemy back. It couldn't last. They would burn through their ammunition soon, and Lethicus was out of workable theoreticals. There were over fifty Night Lords aboard. He had come aboard expecting to mop up a handful, and had walked right into a detachment.

'We are boxed in! Second squad advancing from the rear,' said one of his warriors, ice calm under fire. Another grunted out as he went down, his severed arm bouncing with grotesque slowness from the wall.

'We must effect our escape,' said Lethicus, 'before they cut us down. Breaching squad, to the rear. Stay their advance.' Lethicus thrust his shield at Brother Martius. 'Push them back if you can.'

Martius took the shield and joined the other three breaching squad Space Marines. Together they formed a wall across the corridor. Incoming fire boomed off the locked shields, a storm that grew more ferocious as the station filled with atmosphere. Back to back with their shield-bearing comrades, Lethicus' other men made a second wall facing the opposite direction down the corridor. Their disciplined fire kept the Night Lords back around the gentle curves, but the Ultramarines were so densely packed the enemy could not miss and his warriors were dying one by one.

‘Dominicus, Scandis, Clovius, Batavian – with me!’ he shouted. ‘Close assault!’

Lethicus drew his chainsword. The men called pulled out their gladii and bolt pistols.

‘For Ultramar!’ he called.

‘For Ultramar!’ they responded.

His small group launched themselves into a bounding charge.

There was an art to mounting a close assault in low gravity. Lethicus released the maglocks from his boots and boosted himself forward with a shove of his legs.

He hurtled down the corridor, backpack nozzles venting at maximum. His thermal regulating fluids were depleted by such an extravagant burst, and he felt the deep chill of the station creep through his armour and mesh suit. But it lent him speed. Every round that impacted his thick armour slowed him, but only a little. The amount of firepower the Night Lords threw at them would have been frightening were he a lesser being, and two of his warriors finished their journey as corpses, but he, Batavian and Dominicus slammed into the Night Lords at full speed, their impact rocking the enemy back.

The enemy recovered badly. Hampered by his maglocks, Lethicus’ foe rocked backward, arms wheeling for a balance he could not retain. Lethicus was not slow to exploit it. He punched hard with the guard of his chainsword, cracking eye-lenses gleaming from a painted skull. Air hissed from them. Lethicus jammed his bolt pistol under a second Night Lord’s chin as the first reeled. The recoil of the bolts leaving the barrel jarred his arm, and he needed all his power armour’s might to keep it in place. Three penetrated the neck seal and armour of the warrior’s breathing mask, hollowing out his skull.

Lethicus reactivated his maglocks and slammed his feet down. He aimed a savage chop at the Night Lord with the damaged helmet, cutting through the grisly trophies the traitor wore on a chain around his neck. The severed fingers of murdered legionaries floated away as the teeth of Lethicus’ weapon ground up through ceramite and into the head beneath.

The sword lodged, and Lethicus was forced to abandon it. The trick to survival, Lethicus reminded himself, was to use what you had. He embraced the dead Night Lord, using the corpse as cover and firing past him. The corridor’s span was choked with the floating filth of battle. Covering fire streaked past Lethicus from his men down the corridor, laying low Night Lords that attempted to engage him. Ejected bolt casings bounced from walls.

‘Caias! Caias! Respond!’ called Lethicus.

There was no reply.

A dreadful theoretical formed in his mind. The enemy had outwitted him. Despite his caution, the Night Lords had anticipated his moves. The rumble they had heard was certainly an explosive going off, a trap probably triggered by Caias. They were blocked in here. The only conclusion he could draw was that the enemy was after the *Probity*. Squad Lethicus was being pinned and slaughtered while a second group attacked the undefended vessel. He was certain of it, because that was the practical he would have chosen were he

in their position.

Another Night Lord fell to his bolt pistol. The ammunition indicators on the weapon blinked red. He holstered it and took up his bolter again. More of the enemy were coming down the corridor, sending the debris into a seething, chaotic motion.

Lethicus did not rate his small group's chances. If they pushed forward round the station's central corridor, they would be outside the reach of covering fire. If they stayed put, the Night Lords would pick them off at leisure. Dominicus was wounded, but fought on. Batavian wrestled heavily with a Night Lord, ramming his gladius repeatedly at the traitor's neck seal as his opponent struggled to bring his boltgun under Batavian's plastron. There was a flash as Batavian's power cabling was destroyed and the Ultramarine died. His killer pushed the body away and turned on Lethicus. A bolt streaked by, propellant tail brilliant white, cracking the Night Lord's helmet, exploding and killing him before Lethicus could raise his gun.

Cries came from the men behind him. Night Lords had overwhelmed the two men blocking the door to the central chamber and were coming out into the corridor, splitting Lethicus and his assault group off from the others. The men to the back of the breaching squad kept the enemy from the shieldbearers' vulnerable rear, but it could not last.

The Ultramarines had lost, and the Night Lords knew it.

With a triumphant roar, the Night Lords from the other end of the corridor charged. They banged into the breaching shields with a titanic boom. Suddenly, the Ultramarines' breaching squad was engaged in furious hand-to-hand fighting. Lethicus' men were better protected than the enemy by their shields, but outnumbered, and they were cut down.

Lethicus fought on. Dominicus was attacked by two Nostramans. One pinned Dominicus' arm, and a chainglaive blow from the other ended him. The fight was as brutal as any Lethicus had ever known. Despite his recent experience fighting other Space Marines, he was taken aback by the ferocity of it. The press of giant, armoured bodies was such that weapons were nearly useless. He cast away his boltgun and grappled with his assailants, slamming elbows and fists into faces, aiming to crack their vulnerable helm lenses, exposing the warriors inside to the thin air.

His men's signifiers winked out one after another. Then the foe were behind and in front of him. Someone grabbed at his arm. He shook off his attacker, but two more hands scraped across the plate, scrabbling at him until they held him firm. His armour whined with the effort of trying to free himself. He sent a Night Lord reeling with a final back-handed blow before his other hand was caught, then his legs, and he was grappled down. Lethicus bucked and kicked. Five of the enemy pressed on his limbs, still unable to subdue him, until something was slapped against his armour and a massive electromagnetic pulse shorted out his battleplate, robbing him of its strength. Only then was he overwhelmed.

Kellendvar and his brother slaughtered their way down the spinal way of the *Probity*. There were three thousand human crew aboard the ship, but they might as well have been infants for all the opposition they could muster. The brothers slaughtered them as easily.

Rounds from the shotguns of the armsmen clattered ineffectually off their power armour. They would not run, so Kellendvar killed them where they stood, cleaving them in two with his great headsman's axe. Kellenkir fought with his chainglaive, whirling the toothed head around in a blurred pattern none could penetrate.

'They are not afraid, brother,' said Kellendvar. Wind blew past them, howling out of the breach they had burned through the hull. 'They are brave. It is almost praiseworthy.'

'Their Legion spends much time among them – perhaps that is why they are not prone to the dread. But if they are brave to stand their ground, they are still afraid.' Kellenkir saw it, even if his brother did not. He could smell it through his respirator grille. 'Guilliman makes the lowliest serf think himself a hero!' Kellenkir laughed as his chainglaive took the life from another armsman. The diamond-edged teeth shattered the faceplate of the helmet, carving through the man's armour carapace and into his chest. 'See how they die! Brave or craven matters not. They are weak!'

A group of men were forming up across the corridor, all burly by the standards of their kind and armed with shock-mauls.

'I see no weakness here. They fight with honour,' said Kellendvar.

'Honour or not, weakness is despicable.' Kellenkir ran into the group. Their mauls bounced from his armour, followed shortly by their severed limbs. Arterial spray painted the corridor a dripping red. This finally proved too much, and the survivors turned and ran from Kellenkir.

'The way is clear!' shouted Kellenkir. 'They flee, they have begun to learn their lessons. So it should be. They are not fools like their fellows. Courage is no defence against suffering and death! Run, run little men!' he roared through his voxmitters. 'I will catch and kill you. Your pain will be over soon, I promise you faithfully!'

More men came out through a hatch, and they met Kellendvar's axe. There was a zealous joy in Kellenkir's voice at the slaughter. At a fundamental level this troubled Kellendvar. He dwelt on it as he killed and killed. Killing was life. Killing was survival. As a child, he killed so that he might live for another day. As a Space Marine, he had killed for the Emperor so that mankind might persist. Now he killed for Skraivok, so that he might be free. Fear, specifically that of torture, pain and a filthy death, had ever been the weapon of his Legion. But it was a weapon. A weapon was a tool, to be taken up when needed and set aside when not.

His thoughts went back to the *Nycton*, when he had gone to retrieve his brother from his makeshift torture chamber in the Hall of Trophies. What he had seen there disturbed him. Kellenkir's actions themselves were not a concern. Kellendvar had performed similar mutilations and cruelties many times.

But Kellendvar was not a sadist. He understood the utility of pain and fear. There were many sadists in the Legion who enjoyed using both for the sake of it. Kellenkir certainly was, but his drives went beyond a sadist's petty desire to hurt. There was an evangelism behind Kellenkir's urges.

Another armsman died, chopped through from shoulder to crotch by Kellendvar's axe. It was a clean cut, the death swift, and his axe came free easily. He hefted it, ready to strike again.

There were none of the armed humans left. The corridor was empty. Screaming and boltgun fire sounded far off. Slaughtered men lay in heaps.

'Listen to the joy of it! Come on, brother! Come!' Kellenkir exulted. 'To the bridge! It is the time for you to impress your master. Come with me and share my glory before I change my mind.'

The joy of it? thought Kellendvar. *Is this right?*

A vox-message from Vaiserkon, leading one group of six Night Lords aft, interrupted Kellendvar's train of thought.

'*Kellendvar, the engine rooms are secure.*'

'Casualties?'

'*Zakrash and Menon,*' reported Vaiserkon. '*We encountered legionary resistance. We killed three, two fell back and disappeared into the lower decks. We shall hunt them down.*'

'Ignore them. They may attempt to damage the Geller field to prevent our escape into the warp. Bypass them if so. Chances are they've worked out they're beaten and will try to destroy the vessel. Move on to the primary reactor core immediately. Preventing scuttling of the ship is your primary mission goal. We must take the *Probity*.'

'*Headsman,*' signalled his warrior. The vox cut out.

Kellendvar had not sent his brother with the others for a very good reason. He would have tarried to kill and maim. Such propensity for bloodshed; for a long time he had thought Kellenkir insane.

As he watched Kellenkir dabble his fingers in spilled blood and smear it across the plates of his armour, Kellendvar was beginning to think that was not the case.

He was beginning to fear that his brother was simply evil.

SEVEN

Primary Location Alpha
Inwit
Visions of the father

Primary Location Alpha – Warsmith Barabas Dantioch had never cared much for the name. It was suitable in many ways, identifying the tuning mechanism's significance. It was direct, an efficient name that denoted its importance and its primacy. As an Iron Warrior, albeit a disgraced and outcast one, Dantioch approved of efficiency.

But it did little to capture the sheer marvel of the Pharos, and that was why he found it inadequate.

He stifled a laugh at himself, not wishing Polux to believe his efforts were being mocked.

The Pharos had drawn out the philosopher in him, such was the scale of its power. The beauty of its construction was clean and unadorned in a manner that reminded him of Olympia's great fortress-palaces. Being in the Pharos brought him awe, an emotion that Dantioch had enjoyed only occasionally. After so long an association, the deep thrum of the quantum-pulse engines was a comfort. A day did not pass when he did not uncover some other fascinating facet of the xenos array.

Watching his friend slowly master its workings made him happier still. To share a secret such as the Pharos was to double the pleasure of it.

'Take your time, Alexis!' he called.

Half of the high cavern of Primary Location Alpha was obscured by a wavering image of a distant world. Captain Alexis Polux of the Imperial Fists stood in front of it, his face wrinkled with almost comical effort.

'Good! Good!' Dantioch spoke over the thrum of the quantum engines. The lower registers of their working set up unpleasant vibrations in his injuries, but he had learned to compartmentalise the pain along with the rest of his hurts. 'The mechanism works by inducing quantum sympathies between particles. These occur naturally, but this machine somehow allows the fundamental elements of the universe to be tuned. It is a forcing of empathy between objects, places – perhaps even times – separated by the vast gulfs of space.'

'You have told me this more than a hundred times, Barabas,' shouted Polux as if he were struggling against a high wind. To Dantioch, the place was pleasingly quiet, the noise of the engines as calming as the play of waves. The voice of the Imperial Fist rang loudly. There was no echo. The chamber's polished black walls swallowed sound waves as readily as they did light.

'Then you should be learning.'

Polux grimaced and shook his head. 'I still lack your understanding, Barabas. I do not see

why you cannot perform the search for the other beacons yourself.'

A modest smile lit up Dantioch's ruined face, invisible behind his stern iron mask. 'I know too little of it myself to call it *understanding*. Given time I might endeavour to unlock the basis of its operations. As of now, I merely have a feel for the Pharos' operation. It is poor strategy to rely on one mind. Besides, I need to monitor the equipment for a response, and you know even less about that.' He checked the myriad dials and displays of the consoles installed along the wall. Thick cables spilled out of open panels at their bases, snaking off into the deeps of the mountain where they joined with other Mechanicum machines that moderated the alien device. Dantioch regretted the necessity of these cogitator banks. He had spent many days concerned that they might disrupt the Pharos' processes. That did not seem to be the case, but there was another consideration; for all that the Pharos was xenos technology, and therefore to be mistrusted, the monitoring equipment marred the perfection of its form.

True understanding would always elude him. He had come to terms with that. The construction of the interface for the monitoring equipment alone had taken weeks. Years would pass before he felt comfortable interfering with the Pharos' workings directly, if ever.

Polux sweated with the effort of effecting a tuning. The image of Semsamesh IV wavered as if it were viewed from behind a waterfall. For a moment the planet became solid, taking on the breathtaking clarity that only the Pharos could provide.

'You overthink, my friend – this is not a machine of cold logic, but a spirited thing.' Dantioch thought for a moment. 'Do you ride, on your world?'

'No.'

'Ah.'

'The more primitive tribes use sleds pulled by beasts,' Polux grunted.

'I have neither ridden nor been drawn by animals, so forgive me if my analogy is inappropriate. Imagine the Pharos as a spirited riding animal, a steed that wants to run and run. It is in your power to direct it, but you must reach out to it, work with it. Do not dominate it. Empathise with it, follow its guide and it will provide you with what you truly need. But do not let it dominate you either. Allow the relationship to progress away from balance to either side, and the focus will dissipate.'

Polux ground his teeth in effort. Sweat ran down his face. He lifted his hand in imitation of the psykers he had seen in battle. He felt ridiculous.

Dantioch smiled. 'Yes, brother! You are doing it, feel, do not think! Do not try to force it to do what you want. Tell it what you *need*.'

The distant world blurred, the colours smearing into refracted rainbow auras around the outline of its disc.

'You are nearly there!' said Dantioch.

Polux made a choking noise, his face bunched and turned red.

‘For the love of Terra, Alexis, breathe!’

Polux cried out. The image wavered and seemed to blow away, like mist on the wind.

‘I cannot do it!’ He threw up his hands in frustration. ‘It’s no use! I understand what you are trying to tell me, Barabas, and I have been diligent in my notes. But all this…’ He tossed his head angrily at the strange, alien dimensions of the chamber. ‘I am a soldier and an engineer of stone, no more. I do not have your affinity for machines.’

‘This is a machine of stone.’

‘It is still a machine.’

Dantioch limped over to his friend, his power armour whirring awkwardly at Dantioch’s halting movements. ‘Do not be disillusioned, Alexis. Perhaps, yes… Let us reframe your reference. Think of the Pharos in terms of a strategic asset. See it in terms of a means to victory.’ Dantioch indicated the huge sheet of steel where he had painstakingly engraved a star chart set with a number of icons. ‘All these points, your observatory of the Emperor’s Watch has helped me to identify. The Pharos leans toward them. Perhaps once there were many similar devices, and this is the last. Think of the military application if we were to have two! Or ten, or twenty, or a *thousand* such beacons lighting up the sky! Warp storms would cease to trouble us – we might one day even abandon moving through the warp by ship entirely, if we so desired.’

Polux went to a table and poured water from a bronze ewer into a great cup. ‘A fine sentiment, but I wish it were a weapon, Barabas.’ He drained the cup, refilled it, and drained it again. Then he went to the metal walkway leading out of the chamber and sat down heavily upon its edge. He looked at his hands – one pale, the other crimson – and frowned at them as if they displeased him. ‘There is always talk of the miraculousness of this technology. If it exists, why does the Mechanicum not have it? They barely understand it.’

‘They look for spirits in its workings, and are suspicious of its origins. Magos Carantine is torn between harnessing the Pharos and exorcising it.’

‘They are an odd breed,’ said Polux. ‘Their chatter of gods and ghosts in machines goes against the teachings of the Emperor.’

‘In a manner of thinking, it does. But their understanding is not so black and white as that. And in this time when the creatures of darkest myth spill from holes in reality to devour the innocent, who are we to say they are wrong?’

‘It bewilders me, and using the Pharos exhausts me. I am glad to help you, Barabas, but I cannot help but feel my talents would be best used elsewhere.’

‘Do not be angry, Alexis. We must press on. There are many applications for the technology. Pure weapons. Energy beams that could atomise targets layer by layer, field generators that might push an object out of phase with reality around it. And the possibilities for advanced machine interfacing are profound. All by tuning the quantum state of matter empathically.’

‘You could make these things?’ said Polux, his interest piqued in spite of himself. ‘Both would breach the thickest wall.’

‘You and I think alike! But alas, it is supposition only,’ said Dantioch apologetically.

‘We would work more quickly if you showed me what to look for on the monitoring equipment.’

‘We have a treasure here, Alexis,’ said Dantioch. ‘One that we must learn to use to the full in service of Lord Guilliman. I cannot be the only one who can operate it. If I were to be slain, then our position would worsen.’

‘Then ask the Mechanicum,’ said Polux.

‘I trust you, Alexis. So does Lord Guilliman. The Mechanicum do not have the appropriate mindset to utilise the device. There is too much of the machine in them. They have tried, and they have failed.’

Polux sighed. ‘I will try harder.’

‘Might I make an observation?’

‘Always.’

‘You try *too* hard. Let it guide you.’

Polux was by nature as serious a man as his primarch, guarded and taciturn. But his face took on a look of consternation. ‘I find it difficult to let go. All my training and my culture, they speak against emotion. It is a weakness for a warrior.’

‘It is the same for you and me both. You are of stone, I of iron. Both are unbendable. But in this time of darkness, old certainties are gone. We must trust instinct. Cold logic will only take us so far, and as much as such a sentiment goes against our natural inclinations, we must not reject it. I believe you to have more feeling than I, which is why ultimately I believe you shall be able to control the Pharos far better than I can, even now.’

Polux extended his hand. Dantioch took it. The warsmith gasped a little with discomfort as he helped his friend to his feet.

‘You sound more like a damn poet every day.’

‘Now you go too far!’ Dantioch wheezed through his mask as he stopped himself from laughing; the pain was too great. ‘But perhaps, perhaps.’ He stood back. ‘You have your zeal, we should use that. Think on the utility for our efforts against the traitors.’

Polux nodded reluctantly and went to the centre of the vast chamber to stand beside Dantioch’s high wooden chair, the position they habitually used to tune the device. There he stood, a lonely figure in yellow robes, and stared at the far wall.

Dantioch held his breath.

The wall rippled. Blackness remained. For a moment Dantioch thought Polux had achieved nothing, but then the thrum of the Pharos’ engines changed in pitch. Points of light winked into existence. The tell-tale redness of the Ruinstorm crept across the scene,

and Dantioch saw they were looking at a vista of the void. A white disc wobbled in the centre of the picture, a moon reflected in troubled water. A small, icy world snapped into brief focus – vast sheets of white mottled with brown, the pale atmosphere stained with stratospheric pollution, and a cool white sun blazing in behind it.

As quick as it came it vanished.

'That was not Semshamesh.'

'It was Inwit,' said Polux in bewilderment. 'The world where I was born.'

'What did you do?'

'I did what you said,' said Polux. 'I let go.'

Dantioch turned to his instruments, the constant pain of his injuries forgotten in his excitement. He limped up and down the long console, noting energy spikes and vibrational variations to the quantum engines' output. The crudeness of the Mechanicum's devices frustrated him, for they told him little. He went to a unit dominated by an inset hololithic stage. He brought up a star chart, and scrolled over the galaxy quickly, plotting the distance between Sotha and the ice world.

He gasped. 'The furthest we have yet seen, and a clear image. Eighty per cent of the way to Terra itself! Well done, Alexis, well done!'

'It was not what I was trying to see,' Polux said. 'How can that be judged a success?'

'It is what the Pharos thinks you want to see. Try again.'

'I am not succeeding.'

'Put such thoughts from your mind, for fear of failure will prevent your success.'

Polux sighed, and tried again.

Again the sound of the Pharos' engines shifted, building into a loud, hooting howl. They felt powerful infrasound under the quantum engines' call, a thickening of the air as vibrations pressed in on them, shaking their flesh, armour, and bones.

Dantioch watched needles flicker along brass-rimmed dials. They danced back and forth with the pulse of the Pharos. If the machines were exceeding their tolerances, he would not know immediately. For the moment, he reassured himself that nothing felt wrong.

'Barabas! Barabas! I see him!'

Polux's excited shout had the warsmith turn quickly. Pain jabbed up his ruined side. It was quickly forgotten.

In the focusing point, a blurry image had taken shape. The image was fractured into a number of ghostly layers that Dantioch could make no sense of.

'What is it?' he said. 'What do you see?'

'Dorn! I 'Lord Dorn!' cried Polux. 'Hear me!'

The mountain shook. A punishing beat took hold of the tuning stage, rocking the

chamber to the pulse of an ancient, alien heart. A grinding sound came from deep within the mountain, the dangerous crunch of stone on stone, great masses of it shifting. Dantioch instinctively looked to the ceiling. ‘Alexis, you must stop…’

‘*Father!*’

The light of the image flickered. The mountain howled a polyphonic chord of distress that blared from its multiple openings as loud as any war-horn.

‘Alexis, stop!’

Polux looked to his friend, and Dantioch was arrested by the pain he saw in his face.

The image blinked out.

A calm fell by painful increments. The booming song of the peak quieted. The grumble of the engines deep underground hitched and became smooth again. Aftershocks troubled the peak, however, shiftings in the rock like the grinding of teeth.

‘I saw him,’ breathed Polux. ‘My father lives.’

Dantioch hobbled over to his friend. ‘Are you sure?’

Polux looked at him blankly.

‘You did not see him? He was there! I saw him in his chambers on the *Phalanx*. Could he yet live? Tell me you saw him, Barabas!’

Dantioch hesitated at the look of sorrow Polux gave him. ‘No. I did not, my friend. I am sorry.’

‘But it was him!’

‘Alexis!’ said Dantioch. ‘We do not know. Perhaps you want it too much. Remember the visions the machines send. How can we be sure it was not one of those? It could be a memory, plucked from your mind.’

‘We have only begun to scratch the surface of the Pharos’ potential,’ said Polux.

‘You were only moments ago insisting that you could not tune it.’

‘Let us set our sights higher,’ pleaded Polux. ‘Let me reach out to my father!’

They stood a while, a cripple in steel and a giant in yellow, eyes locked, neither willing to give way.

The moment passed. The indefinable power of their friendship effected some change, and they both backed down.

‘Perhaps you did see him,’ Dantioch conceded.

‘Perhaps I did not,’ breathed Polux, his voice thick with emotion.

Their voices were soft in the chamber, all power to them stolen away by the black stone.

‘If you did or you did not, I have another concern. I fear we may have damaged the Pharos.’ Dantioch moved back to the monitoring stations and brought up a hololith of the

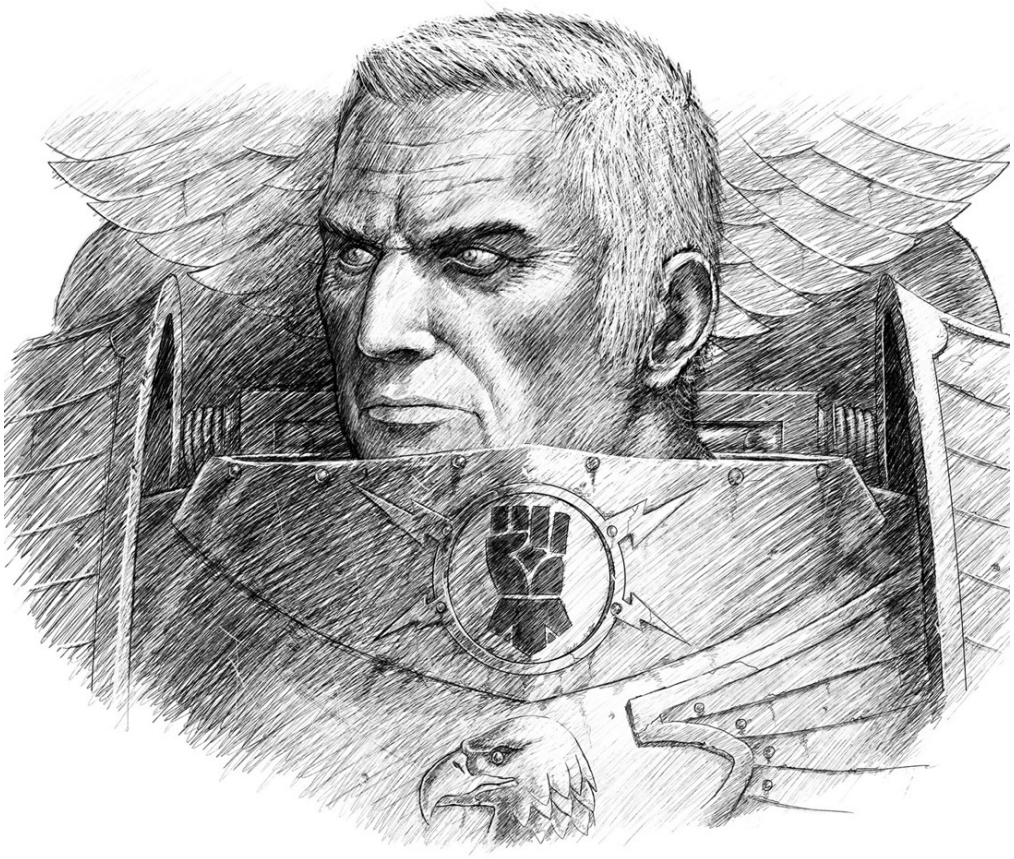
tunnel structures. Several glowed a warning red. ‘Whatever it was that happened induced great strain on the mechanism. We must be more cautious in future.’

see Lord Dorn!’ shouted Polux.

The quantum-pulse engines whined louder and higher again. The mountain throbbed with their effort. Dantioch ran his eyes over the devices. Needles crept into the red segments of their dials.

‘He leans over an ornate table,’ cried Polux. ‘Charts and data-slates are piled high all over it, and he consults them! Lord, lord, hear your son!’

Dantioch still saw nothing. The moan of the engines rose, bringing with it a hot wind gusting through the endless tunnels of the mountain.



Primarch Rogal Dorn, from Dantioch’s sketchbook

EIGHT

Brothers opposed
Last stand
Monsters

Caias stumbled through the inner doors of a small airlock and back onto the *Probity*. He was a hundred metres aft and two decks below the main bridge. He feared he was too late. The sounds of combat rang throughout the vessel. There were not many Night Lords, but he had no doubt that with only a limited number of the Legion to protect the crew, the traitors would take the bridge with ease.

He breathed raggedly, each inhalation an agony. His primary heart had stopped. Blood soaked his mesh underarmour. He would not survive without medical attention. The chances of that were vanishingly small.

He had to get to the bridge. As he walked, the blood frozen to the outside of his battleplate melted and fell in fat drops to the deck plates. Where he steadied himself on the wall he left scarlet smears. Never had a hundred metres seemed so far.

The spinal corridor was deserted, but the sounds of fighting echoed off its hard metal edges. There was so much screaming.

The bridge blast doors were closed. No signs of conflict there yet. ‘Gellius. It’s me, Brother Caias. Let me in,’ he voxed.

The bridge doors slid open a crack. A single boltgun met him.

‘Caias?’

‘Tiberius, help me.’

The doors opened a fraction more. Brother Tiberius slid out warily, looking past Caias down the corridor. ‘We feared you dead.’

‘You are mostly correct,’ said Caias. He took his brother’s arm and leaned on him. ‘My primary heart is damaged, and my lungs. I will not survive this.’

‘None of us will.’

Tiberius helped him through the doors. They slid closed the moment he was through, and they were into a bridge full of tense chatter and fear. Brother Hellas was there with Tiberius.

‘Where is Lethicus?’ he said.

‘Ambushed,’ said Caias.

Caias pushed Tiberius away and stood as steadily as he was able. ‘Hear me, servants of Ultramar,’ Caias said, addressing the command deck’s crew. ‘There is no winning this situation. We are outnumbered. Lethicus is embroiled on the station, possibly dead. The

Night Lords attempt to take the ship. We have no choice but to prevent the *Probity* falling to the foe.'

Silence greeted his words.

'Gellius, you have the authority,' said Caias.

'I will give the destruct command, my lord.'

'Hellas,' said Caias. Every word was a gasp of pain. 'See to the Navigator. He must not fall into enemy hands if we are unsuccessful.'

On a ship the size of the *Probity*, there was no palatial dwelling for the Navigator, only a sealed pit situated above the command deck.

'Yes, brother,' said Hellas. He made for the stairs recessed into the wall that led to the Navigator's sanctum.

'Navigator Morosi-Hin is a loyal man,' said Gellius.

'Then he will die without complaint. However the Night Lords got into the Sothan System, we will not make their departure any easier. They cannot be allowed to leave, for they have seen the Pharos. Vratus, tell Master Kivar to send a message to Sotha, request that Mistress Tibanian send one to Macragge.'

'Kivar is afraid to open his mind,' said Vratus. 'He fears what he sees in the warp.'

'He is going to die whatever happens. Tell him that if he owes any loyalty to the Emperor, he will gladly give up his life for the Imperium. If that does not work, I shall tell him what the Night Lords will likely do to get him to serve them.'

Vratus spoke again into the vox. The crew was intent upon its own extinction, but Caias' orders gave them structure, and they fought back their fear.

Caias limped to the first step down from the main dais, and crouched there. He leaned against the shallow lip between the dais and the first crew tier, nursing the agony in his chest. Without intending it, his eyes slid shut. He drifted away until a voice called him back. It was only for a moment according to his suit chronometer, but it felt like an age. Perhaps that was what death was like, he thought. In better circumstances he would fall into hibernation, but the circumstances were as they were.

'Lord Caias?' Vratus said. Caias roused himself. 'Kivar agrees. What should he send?'

'A simple message. Let Sotha know the Night Lords are coming. Send out a vox-signal, maximum gain, see if you can overpower the Night Lords' counter-vox. Perhaps we can warn one of the patrols of what has happened here.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Vratus.

Gellius stood up from his station and solemnly saluted the Ultramarine.

'I have no reply from the engine room, my lord, but have activated the self-death mechanisms here. We have only a few minutes.'

'Thank you, Shipmaster Gellius.' As crisply as he could, Caias returned the salute.

A grinding, metallic voice boomed out over the ship's vox-system. '*Plasma reactor core destruction sequence initiated. Inhibition governors offline. Magnetic field inductors offline. Fuel injection accelerated. Critical mass will commence in three minutes. Reactor death in three point five minutes. All crew abandon ship. Saviour pods unlocked*.'

Nobody moved. There was nowhere to go.

A boom sounded on the far side of the door. All eyes went to it. Caias drew his weapon and shifted into a painful kneel, using the step as cover. Hellas returned from the Navigator's sanctum.

'It is done,' he said. He took up position at the side of the door. Tiberius joined him.

'The Night Lords will die with the rest of us,' shouted Caias. 'We will not wait passively for this to occur. Draw your weapons, servants of Ultramar. When they come through that door, greet them with the hospitality they have earned with their treachery. Show them your hate.'

'*Two minutes until reactor death,*' intoned the dead voice of the ship. The bridge crew drew their laspistols and crouched behind the stations where they had lived out their adult lives. Caias was surprised to see a couple of them muttering to themselves, pressing tattered booklets to their lips. Prayers, he supposed. Every day the Imperial Truth looked thinner and thinner. Had anyone but the Legions ever believed it?

In this time of gods and monsters, he was not sure he did himself.

Four muffled clanks came from the other side of the bulkhead.

'Melta charges,' said Tiberius. 'Stand ready, they are coming through.'

A quiet whooshing noise broke the silence of the bridge as the fusion devices activated. A quartet of dull red points glowed around the Ultima upon the doors. They spread rapidly across the plasteel, until the whole door shone with furnace heat. The centres glowed brighter, until they became white hot. The harsh smell of burning metal filled the room. Dribbles of liquid fire ran from the doors, becoming a torrent as they expanded and joined together. Hot metal sparked as it splashed on the floor.

The doors sagged and collapsed inwards.

Caias opened fire.

'The Emperor protects!' someone shouted.

A raging giant burst through the door before it had finished disintegrating. Molten metal streamed from his war-plate as he leapt, the long-handled chain weapon the Night Lords favoured gripped in both hands. Hellas and Tiberius fired several rounds at the warrior. A few hit, but none penetrated his war-plate. The warrior swung his chainglaive around, letting his hands slide to the very end of the shaft. It smashed into Tiberius' helmet, caving it in. Hellas aimed at him at point-blank range, but the Night Lord was unbelievably fast. He brought his weapon around and batted Hellas' gun to one side. The bolt exploded in the ship's wall as his fire went wide.

‘*One minute until reactor death.*’

Lasbolts and bolt-rounds sparked from the warrior’s armour, sending showers of melting metal from the door all over the bridge. A man screamed as it splashed on his skin. Still the Night Lord did not stop, killing the deck crew indiscriminately. A second was stepping through, bearing a chainsword and pistol. Boltgun fire came from behind him. Caias switched targets and shot at the newcomer, eviscerating him with three carefully placed rounds to the torso. Before he could fall, another ran from behind, pushing the dead man forward as a shield. As he reached the edge of the command dais, he flung his dead comrade outward into the crew tiers, crushing one and scattering others. The crew fired frantically at him, but their laspistols did little more than scorch his armour.

He too was formidable. Lightning patterns played over his battleplate, and he wielded a huge two-handed power axe. With a roar, he leapt at Caias, his great weapon whistling and buzzing as it fell. The Ultramarine raised his bolter in both hands. The weapon sheared through it in a burst of sparks. Caias stepped back and drew his gladius. Something tore inside him. The vital sign monitors in his helm screamed warnings at him.

The axeman drove again at Caias, forcing him into another parry that sent a spear of agony through his chest. He tried to raise his weapon back into a guard position, but all the strength fled his arm, then his legs. He wavered on his feet, stumbled and went to one knee.

More Night Lords had entered and were massacring the crew. Unarmoured, the humans were blown to pieces by mass-reactive rounds. Hellas duelled with the glaive-wielder. He was outmatched. The Night Lord drove the butt of his weapon hard into the Ultramarine’s torso, cracking the metal. Hellas staggered. A swing took his arm off at the elbow, then another his leg. The Night Lord was laughing, toying with Hellas.

Caias looked up at the Nostraman towering over him. He held in his hand a ragged piece of machinery, like a heart torn from a chest.

‘*Reactor death. Reactor death. Reactor death. Ave Imperator,*’ said the ship.

Nothing happened. The Nostraman tossed the device onto the floor.

‘A good play, Ultramarine, but not clever enough. Your ship is ours.’

Caias looked at it. He could feel the life running out of him.

‘Why did you turn…?’ croaked Caias.

‘We will not be slaves to a liar,’ said the other.

‘Your kind killed the man who made us. No freedom is worth that.’

‘We have not killed him yet!’ said the warrior. He laughed loudly, the thought evidently amusing him.

‘The… The Emperor lives?’ Caias murmured.

The axeman snorted. ‘So you do not know? Aye, he lives. But let it be no comfort to you, for we shall slay him soon enough.’

Caias gritted his teeth. ‘You think you will ever be free? You cannot win. You have become monsters.’

The axeman raised his weapon. ‘We always were.’

Skraivok stepped over the slagged remains of the bridge’s blast door. Night Lords dragged the crew from their stations, living or dead. Fire burned in one corner, clogging the air with thick black smoke. Skraivok approved. There was just enough damage to the ship to make it all look believable.

Shattered bodies were draped everywhere. Two dead Ultramarines lay by the breached doors. A headless third lay upon the deck.

Kellendvar fell to his knees as Skraivok entered, but Kellenkir simply toyed with a Space Marine’s severed head. Both brothers were helmetless. Their faces were so alike, thought Skraivok; the touch of Curze in both could not completely overwrite their common birth heritage. But their expressions were entirely different.

Kellendvar clasped his hands about the long haft of his axe and presented it to his master. ‘The ship is yours, claw master,’ he said.

‘Brother Kellendvar, you never fail me.’

‘I never shall, my lord.’

Kellenkir sneered at his brother’s obeisance. ‘The ship is yours for now, but it will soon belong to Krukesh,’ he said sneeringly. ‘Tell me, Painted Count, how much of the fighting did you do yourself?’

Skraivok unclasped his helmet. The stale air inside hissed free as the neck seals parted. He lifted the helmet off gently, revealing the pale Nostraman face beneath. Square, black lines ran from his forehead to chin over both his eyes, swelling around his eye sockets to colour the full orbit. Delicate lightning-pattern tattoos decorated each cheek.

Ship’s air was rarely pleasant to breathe. Either overly dry or overly moist, often too hot or too cold, always tainted with the smell of the machinery that cleansed it and the sweaty odours of many bodies living in close proximity. After a battle one could add the iron-rich stink of blood, voided bowels, fire, smoke, hot metal and the sharp, nose-tickling smell of fyceline to that unpleasant mix. Nevertheless, after two weeks of battleplate-recycled air, it was delightful to Skraivok. He closed his eyes in pleasure, letting the draught of the ship’s air currents dry days-old sweat. He breathed deeply, then maglocked his helm to his hip. He looked Kellenkir dead in the eye and beckoned behind himself.

Four Night Lords dragged the Ultramarines sergeant onto the bridge and dropped him hard on the floor. The upper part of his body had been stripped of armour. Pain spikes were lodged into several of his interface ports and his face was bloated with decompression damage.

‘Their leader?’

‘This is Sergeant Lethicus. Does this answer your question, Kellenkir? I was among those who caught him.’

‘Among them. So you had help? All hail our mighty warlord!’

The Ultramarine groaned and his eyelids fluttered. Kellenkir grinned evilly and walked over to him.

He dropped the severed head onto the deck. He laughed at the Ultramarine’s reaction.

‘A friend of yours? He fought well considering his wounds. He dragged himself all the way back here from the station to fight with his comrades, not that it made any difference. He died anyway, as we all shall die.’

‘Leave the prisoner be, Kellenkir,’ said Skraivok. ‘He is mine.’

A feverish light ignited in Kellenkir’s eyes. ‘Let me have him, Skraivok. I will make him scream for death. Give him to me and I will show him the futility of life and the inevitability of pain. Perhaps then you and I will forge a deeper bond, signed in the humours of this man.’

Kellenkir loomed over the downed sergeant, and pressed hard on a gaping wound in his side. The Ultramarine grunted with pain. He spat a mix of acid and blood into Kellenkir’s face. The Night Lord reared up, his hand going to his burning skin. He held it there as his flesh hissed, and then he laughed again.

‘So bold, so sure of yourselves – avenging sons of the Avenging Son. You will learn your fury counts for nothing. Under my careful knife you shall suffer for your arrogance.’

Lethicus smiled bloodily back. ‘Coward. Face me blade to blade and let that decide who is arrogant and who is not.’

‘You will face my blade, only you shall have no hands to hold your own.’

Kellenkir revved his chainglaive, and raised it to strike.

Skraivok drew his bolt pistol. With his eyes fixed on Kellenkir and without looking at the dying Ultramarine, he aimed and shot a single bolt into his head. Lethicus’ skull shattered as the mass-reactive detonated, spraying them all with brain matter.

Kellenkir’s face twisted in fury.

‘We do not have time for you to indulge yourself, Kellenkir. Let this be a contract between us – if you wish to sate your appetites, do as I say.’ Skraivok activated his vox-bead and addressed his company. ‘My worthy Forty-Fifth! Hear me now. The cost in blood to our comrades has been high! You shall be avenged! Let slip your bloodlust. End every life on this ship, make them scream to their False Emperor for his aid. The Emperor was to give such creatures as these the things we have earned by conquest and by blood! Let this vessel run with their vitae so that they will know what we sacrificed! Let them remember the fundamental law of the universe, that the strong shall prevail!’

His men responded eagerly. Screams rang out from the lower decks as Skraivok’s warriors set to work. Tired of their confinement, they attacked with wanton cruelty. Soon blood would gather in the sumps of the ship.

Kellenkir smiled at the thought. ‘Some days, Skraivok, I almost like you.’

With a theatrical flourish, Skraivok depressed a button set into his vambrace. Kellenkir howled in agony and fell to the ground as if shot through with a volkite beam.

‘My title is claw master, Brother Kellenkir. Use it.’

Kellenkir spasmed, his kicking feet pulverising the flesh of the fallen and destroying the bridge railing.

‘I had not got round to telling you this, Kellenkir, as I was saving it as a surprise for you. But it looks like I just could not wait. I really do hope you are not upset that it is spoiled. So, you see, I had pain spikes installed in all of your armour’s neural links. I rather like the effect. Do not tempt me to overuse it, or I may grow bored.’ Skraivok leaned close to Kellenkir’s face. Kellenkir’s teeth were clamped immovably together, his muscles locked. He glared hatred at his captain. ‘And neither you nor I wish me to become bored.’

Skraivok left Kellenkir writhing upon the floor, and ignored Kellendvar’s regard.

‘Gallivar,’ he ordered. ‘Send out a message to the *Umber Prince*, laser pulse only. Inform them that we have our prize and to pass the news on to Lord Krukesh. Quickly now, we have a great deal of work to do.’

NINE

Some small paradise
Mericus
Light song

Sothopolis was a dusty city set on the plain between the sea and the rising lands of the interior. Eight parallel streets running along the coast, eight others crossing them, and that was pretty much all of it. The smallest iteration of an Ultramar urban grid, Sothopolis was still too big for the population living there. Consequently much of its footprint was unoccupied by people or buildings. The centre looked impressive, but two streets away from the squat Imperial Adepta precinct empty lots abruptly took over, framed by ferrocrete roads that would not see the shade of a building, not in Mericus Giraldus' time.

The city omnibus stopped with a hiss of air brakes. Chain-link fences around the empty lots chinked in the soft sea breeze. The omnibus halt was right at the edge of town. A field of tall cereals began on one side of the road, a square of scraped-down earth waited for the buildings of the future on the other.

Mericus climbed down out of the cool interior of the vehicle, dragging his army fieldsack and rifle with him. He was dressed in dappled camo fatigues, the sole passenger on a vehicle designed to carry one hundred. The lack of passengers would not stop the timetable, not in Roboute Guilliman's realm. The omnibus ran as regularly as Macraggian clockwork, doing a circuit of the tiny city every hour before heading off to the landing fields ten kilometres away, coming back by the Aegida Castellum on the mountain's slopes, through the fields and the forest edge of Odessa – as equally gridded and well ordered as the young settlement – in case anyone needed to come back from their work early. They never did.

The only times the omnibus was at full capacity was when it took the agriworkers out and when it brought them back. Transporting them all took three journeys, each timetabled and executed to the second. The remainder of the day the bus trundled round and around the streets, almost always empty, the servitor-driver's black glass eyes fixed forever forward. Mericus rode it sometimes on his monthly day off; it was hypnotically soothing and a good place to think. But only if the weather was bad, and it rarely was bad on Sotha.

Behind Sothopolis the ground rose gradually until, all of a sudden, Mount Pharos jumped up and soared relentlessly skywards. It dominated the landscape for kilometres. Sometimes it seemed like there was nothing on Sotha *but* Mount Pharos. For two-thirds of its height it was covered in the fuzzy green of quicktree forest. A band of shrubs and grasses extended above the treeline a few hundred metres more, to peter out in sheer cliffs of rock. The mountain was in the lower latitudes where it was warm all year, but the summit was cold and bare.

That it was reckoned a single mountain was due to its sole peak, but in truth Mount Pharos was a great wall of a thing, twelve kilometres long, bracketing the plain around the

bay of Sothopolis in protective arms of basalt. It was so much bigger than its brothers and sisters of the Blackrock range, and so far out from them, that it looked out of place, artificial almost. Mount Sotha was a giant anomaly hiding an enigma.

That's it. What a genius I am, thought Mericus, mocking himself at framing it so.

But there was little natural about Mount Pharos. Apertures opened all over it, from holes the size of a man's fist to gaping caverns that would accommodate a battle tank. They were important, apparently, and one of the duties of the colony was cutting back the undergrowth around the cave mouths. A never-ending task. Sothan trees grew fast. There was an organic uniformity to the holes, like the internal structures of a living being, and where they punctured the surface the warm grey stone of the mountain became a glossy, vitreous black.

There was a smaller cave up there, right at the top, hidden by a huge rib of rock that leaned outward from the mountain. A landing pad perched precariously on the end of this promontory, while beside it a funicular railway ran from the base of the mountain all the way to the top.

On the black crags of the summit, a fortification perched. Ostensibly it was an observatory, but it was built by the Legiones Astartes and so was more redoubt than research station.

Mericus had preferred the mountain the way it had been, without keep, railway or landing pad. No one would ever suggest that the mountain had a personality, but the colonists attributed their feelings of well-being to the peak. Sticking a big castle on the top seemed an affront.

Mericus rested his pack and his lasgun against the chain-link fence around that final empty lot. There Sothopolis stopped and the agricolum began. It was as clean as the line on the map it undoubtedly had been planned upon.

The city agricolum occupied the remainder of the plain between sea and mountain. This was also new, established to feed the legionaries garrisoning the planet. Circles of crops stretched off in ordered rows, divided by dead-straight gravel tracks that shimmered in the heat. Each field had an automated drip-feed irrigation rig at the centre, their long arms driven by the sun. The fields framed Sothopolis with a patchwork of gentle Terran colours, crops as ancient as mankind and dragged across the stars with them. The agricolum was far more extensive than the city, for all that the fields did not stretch far. At the first risings of the mountain, the browns and yellows of earthly plants stopped. There the Aegida Castellum stood watch over the city, and the bright blue-green of Sotha's vigorous native vegetation took over.

Pretty as a picture, thought Mericus, breathing deeply of the fragrant morning air. He was content. Today he was not going to the fields or the forests. Today he was on military rotation, and he liked military rotation.

Avians screeched in profusion over the cliffs where the mountain met the sea. A lighter grumbled up from the tiny spaceport. Mericus tracked the craft as it climbed above the

height of the mountain towards the glint of the orbital. Day or night, the legionary base gleamed reassuringly up there, locked in geosynchronous orbit over Sothopolis.

By any objective definition, Sotha was a paradise. The nine hundred families that serviced the outpost lived like kings. They had plenty of space, a gentle world, they ate fresh food. Their work was respected by the Legion. Their children grew up healthy and strong, and there was a pleasing lack of things trying to kill them.

'What more could a man ask for?' sighed Mericus contentedly.

It wouldn't last, he could see that. Things were changing. Until a couple of years ago, most of the colony had lived in rough hamlets on the lower mountain slopes. Sothopolis had been a three-block street, the agricolum had been a forest broken up by slash-and-burn fields.

If the weed-grown lots that made up two-thirds of Sothopolis looked like over-planning, they were not. Nothing was needlessly built in the Five Hundred Worlds. One day, the planet's restricted status would be lifted, colonists from overcrowded worlds would flood there, and the Sothans' simple pastoral culture would be swept away.

For a while, the newcomers would enjoy Sotha's near-pristine nature, before smirching it with their lives. Man always brought his poisons with him; he couldn't help it, it was in his nature. Not even Roboute Guilliman could prevent that.

Mericus counted his blessings. For the moment, Sotha only occasionally took new people. The colony was small and could not quite sustain its numbers, and ten places had come up because of a shortfall in births. Sotha's calm atmosphere seemed to put a brake on humanity's overwhelming desire to multiply. Perhaps there were concerns about the genetic diversity of such a small group. Whatever the reason, Mericus had lucked out. Those sent to Sotha had been chosen from colonial applicants all over Ultramar. Mericus didn't deserve it, he really didn't. He was named for a mighty nation of Old Earth, so his father had confided in him in a rare moment of friendliness. Mericus didn't believe he lived up to it.

If he knew one thing he knew himself, and he was unstintingly honest in his appraisal. He had been many things, none of them exactly honourable – a gambler, a rogue. If he was not a thief, then he had come pretty damn close a few times. He was a little bit unreliable, a little bit insolent, and little bit too free with his affections. Nothing very bad, but not exactly the picture of upright Ultramarian morality either.

Seven years ago after some bad business on Cliestro, the aftermath of which he had barely survived, he had decided to ship out to the frontier and make a new start. He had not in his wildest dreams expected a posting to somewhere like Sotha.

An eight-wheeled, high-cabbed loader rumbled by, its long bed piled with quicktree trunks from the logging camps. He flapped the dust it kicked up away from his face.

He checked his chronometer. If he left now, he would be on time for the rendezvous. More or less.

He waited a few minutes more, because there was something he wanted to see, and right

there was one of the best places to see it.

The sun crept higher in the sky. The light struck the mountain's peak just so.

One by one, the dark, forbidding caverns honeycombing Mount Pharos' surface lit up with rich, liquid light. No sound came with the mountain's welcome to each new sunrise, but Mericus thought of it as a song. The effect that had earned Mount Pharos its name lasted less than half a minute, but in that time Sothopolis' gentle rhythms stopped as all eyes went to the mountain.

The amber light blinked out of each cave with a series of brilliant flashes starting at the bottom, finishing with the last below the new fortress-observatory.

The caves returned to their dark, blank state.

Mericus smiled broadly. Time to go.

He hitched his rucksack onto his back, adjusted his helmet so it hung comfortably on his front, pulled a pair of non-regulation dark glasses out of a pouch on the webbing, and shouldered his lasgun.

Sotha was a paradise all right, but its days were numbered. War gripped the heavens. One only had to look upwards, where space-time writhed beyond the perfect blue sky of Sotha's day. At night the heavens glowed and the stars were blotted out. On the worst nights, sinuous, eye-watering patterns of unnatural colour tormented the soul.

At night under the dread aurorae, the calming effect of the mountain vanished.

Mericus' dreams had grown dark of late.

The Sothan First were scattered either side of a trail of beaten earth atop the south ridge, leading through stands of young quicktrees so thick you couldn't put an arm between them.

Tiny Jonno was the first to spot Mericus coming up the path from the plains.

'Hey, everyone! Sergeant Giraldus is here. That's all of us. Can we finally get going now?' shouted Jonno.

'Where have you been?' asked Trooper Hasquin. He was sat close to Tiny, tossing his knife into the earth, retrieving it, wiping it, and tossing it again.

'Travelling,' said Mericus. 'Am I not a traveller wending my way along the journey of life like the rest of you worthy crew? Are we all not travellers?'

'Got lost in the bush more like,' grumbled Chelvan Quintus, a tall, bulky man whose hands were never free of field dirt. His hips were bulky with pouches the size of saddlebags, each one housing a heavy bolter clip. Dorican, the weapon's gunner, sat a few metres from his friend, rubbing gun oil into the squad's massive heavy weapon with his similarly massive hands.

'How could I get possibly get lost?' said Mericus.

Chelvan kicked at the dense brush around the clearing. 'Damn trees are up already. Four

months back I was on forestry rotation cutting them down right here, and here they are again, higher than our heads. Quicktree scrub all looks the same. Easy to get lost, and you aren't from here.'

'Easy for you, maybe. Chelvan, Sothan-born or not, my sense of direction is much better than yours. I got the omnibus as far as the Via Ultima Agrorum and walked the field roads.' He let his rucksack slip to the ground, then his rifle. He interlaced his hands, pushed his palms out and stretched his back with audible pleasure. 'The reason I am late is that it is such a glorious day and I took my time.'

The others laughed. There were thirty of them in the auxilia platoon, divided into three squads of ten. Mericus was well liked. Lieutenant Vitellius looked up at the commotion from where he was deep in consultation with his other two sergeants. He caught Mericus' eye and scowled.

'I see the lieutenant's seen you,' said Jonno.

'Sergeant Giraldus, get yourself up here!'

Mericus' squad made a series of catty 'oohs'.

'Now, now boys. Show some respect to our bold leader.'

Mericus walked the trail, stepping over the outstretched legs of men chatting easily in the sun. There was only a token auxilia presence on Sotha, and so each Sothan male was expected to spend one third of the year under arms. Military service came easily to the Sothans, many of whom spent months alone in the forests and mountain pastures herding flocks of quarians.

'Govenisk, Bolarion,' said Mericus to the sergeants with Vitellius.

'Where by Terra have you been?'

'And good day to you, Lieutenant Vitellius.'

'Rendezvous was 0630, Mericus. 0630!'

Mericus lifted his chronometer to his eyes. 'And now it is 0638. Hulio, come on. I was four minutes late.'

'Dammit, Mericus, use the proper protocol when we're out on duty,' said Vitellius.

'Grouchy today, sir? Well.' He patted his backpack. 'My squad is ready.'

'I should have you up on charges. I should have you flogged for this.'

Mericus raised an eyebrow.

Vitellius had the decency to look abashed. 'Look, it's well within my power. Don't push me.'

'I don't think your darling Seara would approve of such an action.'

Vitellius' face twisted in annoyance. 'Don't exploit our friendship. You're killing any sense of discipline. Help me here, please! Just don't be late again,' Vitellius said, stalking

off to the head of the column. ‘And get your section in order!’

‘As you command,’ said Mericus. ‘We march for Macragge.’ He turned back down the trail and hollered at his troop. ‘You heard the man – up, up everyone. We have a long walk ahead of us!’

His men stood up, yawning in the hot sun.

‘I think he’s yearning for his regular units again, Mericus.’

‘The time has come once more to call me sergeant, Jonno.’

‘I think he’s yearning for his regular units again, sarge,’ said Jonno.

‘That’ll do,’ said Mericus. ‘Well now, that’s the problem with training the likes of us. We all know everyone. Even Vitellius is part of the community now. How are they supposed to maintain any sort of order?’

‘Remember when he arrived? What he was like when they sent him down from the castellum? He would have whipped you then,’ said Jonno.

‘Maybe he would,’ said Mericus. ‘He’s a good man though. Better than me.’

‘I hate troop rotation,’ said Chelvan. ‘I don’t see why they don’t get more soldier boys in, let us do the work we’re best suited to.’

Mericus draped a comradely arm around Chelvan’s neck. ‘Because, dear Chelvan, this place is supposed to be a big secret. You know what “restricted” means?’

‘Sarge, I…’

‘It means,’ said Mericus, ‘that they don’t want a lot of curious types poking their noses into what’s going on here.’ He nodded up to the mountain. ‘A bunch of soldiers won’t help that, will it? How do you keep their mouths shut if you transfer them elsewhere? If you keep them here, how do you accommodate the swelling population when you ship new blood in to replace the old farts every man sadly yet inevitably becomes? Our lord and master on Macragge is keeping this place manageable and simple, and that means…’ He slapped Chelvan on the back. ‘Well, that means you, friend.’

Chelvan scowled back. ‘I still hate it,’ he grumbled. ‘Pointless waste of time.’

‘You’re on your own there,’ laughed Morio, the youngest of them all. ‘I love it.’

‘Better this than scything back the brush on such a day. And if it weren’t for us there would be more regular army units here. The harvest would never be brought in,’ said Mericus.

‘Why not?’ said Chelvan.

‘Because, my small-brained friend, we’d be chasing soldiers off our daughters. Lucky for us there’s only a few of them, up in that fort,’ said Mericus.

‘You don’t have any daughters, sergeant,’ said Jonno.

‘It’s rather you we’re chasing off our daughters,’ said Pontian, a dark-haired man with a

serious face.

Mericus affected to look hurt. ‘Daughters? Please! I’m a gentleman.’ He grinned. ‘It’s your wives you have to worry about.’ He looked at his nine lads. All of them tanned, wiry Sothan-men. It was a testimony to the easy-going nature of the place how they’d accepted Mericus and his authority over them.

‘Come on! In a line, boys! We’re ready to go. Jonno, Aelius, you’re taking first shift helping Dorican and Chelvan carry *Domitia*.’

Jonno and Aelius groaned and went to stand by the heavy bolter.

‘She’s really heavy, sarge!’ said Jonno. ‘I’ve the best eyes, send me up front.’

‘There’ll be nothing to see until we hit the mountain. It is heavy, yes, and that’s why you’re helping to carry it,’ he said. ‘Now shush.’

Thirty soldiers and their leaders fell into line, packs on their backs and lasguns at the ready. In that moment, they went from a village outing to a proper military outfit. It was remarkable, thought Mericus.

‘Patrol!’ shouted Vitellius. ‘Prepare to move out.’

‘Where to?’ said Hasquin. The question was a ritual in Mericus’ squad, as were the replies.

‘Round the mountain, up the mountain, then back home again!’ sang out Jonno.

‘Why do they make us sleep in the barracks, when our own beds are only down the bloody hill?’ said Dorican, his voice deeper than the rest.

‘Because this week we’re in the army!’ all replied.

‘Sothan First Irregular Auxilia!’ shouted Vitellius.

‘Ho! Ho! Ho! Sothan First!’ they all replied.

‘Prepare to move out,’ said Vitellius.

Jonno, Aelius, Chelvan and Dorican bent to the carrying handles on the heavy bolter. As they lifted it, Dorican used his free hand to slap the bipod into the stowed position.

‘Sothan First, move out!’ shouted Vitellius.

The column began a slow march up the ridge towards the mountain, winding its way through stands of rapidly regenerating trees.

‘And so we go, off for another walk in the sunshine, carrying a lasgun,’ said Mericus contentedly.

‘If only it were a wineskin, eh, sarge?’

‘By the Emperor, beloved by all – aye to that, Tiny. Aye to that.’

TEN

Memorial's ruin
The Five Hundred
Miracle

'There is some minor damage to the upper halls. Magos Carantine's servitor-drones are checking the fabric of the walls. Some cracking, I fear. What effect this has had on the function of the beacon is unknowable.'

'I see you perfectly well, warsmith,' said Captain Casmir.

Dantioch had to agree, the effects of the damage appeared minimal. The ruins of the Chapel of Memorial filled the stage as it did whenever the Pharos was tuned to it, as real as if it occupied half the chamber of Primary Location Alpha and was not light years away. The black floor of the Pharos stopped, the chipped tiles of the chapel began. On the Macragge side of the divide it was night. Forests of candles flickered atop layered candlestands as tall as primarchs. Through the chapel's open roof, Dantioch could see the angry red glow of the Ruinstorm, so much brighter there than at Sotha. Long use had made him an expert at reading the empathic field of the device. It fascinated and repulsed him equally, and he could scarcely believe it, but he could *feel* the anger of the sky. There was an overwhelming madness coming from the storm, the kind that would flood into him if he regarded it too closely. When he looked upon it he had an inkling of what had overcome his brothers, and so he did not.

He could also read Casmir as easily as if he were a book. Today Valentus Dolor's equerry was as warm as always towards the warsmith, but a guardedness had come over him when he had been told of their ranging efforts and Polux's vision of Inwit.

The warsmith shifted in the audience throne. Failing to find a position that lessened the pain of his crooked back, he forced himself to remain still. Two of the Invictarus guard waited by the broken arch of the chapel. They stood in perfect stillness at attention. That was a feat Dantioch could no longer hope to emulate.

The warsmith's body was wrecked, destroyed by his own kin. When he walked the pain was excruciating, but when he was still it was worse. Pain nibbled constantly at the edge of his psycho-conditioning. He felt as he had never expected to – like an old man used up by life. Only his will and the support of his battleplate allowed him to function at all. *Iron within, iron without,* he thought ironically. He would have laughed, but that was something else he had learned not to do too often, as it brought on racking coughs that ripped through his thorax in a storm of knives.

Many who met him assumed he wore his warsmith's mask to hide his disfigurements. To a very small degree this was true, but only to a very small degree. Dantioch was a man of the mind. He cared little for the aesthetics of his own form. The battered nature of his suit told that clearly. To those who asked, he said he wore it from shame, to remember who he was, so that he might never forget the treachery of his brothers. And this was also true.

But Dantioch did have pride. Pride in his Legion and in his oaths that had kept him steadfast in the face of Krendl's betrayal at the Schadenhold. Pride had seen him wounded. Pride kept him masked. The pain of betrayal marked his face more than scars, and Dantioch did not want his suffering to be remarked upon – only his deeds.

'This conduit is open often, Captain Casmir. The machine has become accustomed to it. I and Alexis find it a simple matter to focus it there. Macragge is not so far, in galactic terms. If the Pharos has been compromised, then speaking with you is not an adequate measure to judge it by. So the question still stands. Do we continue our search for other operating beacons in order to extend the reach of the new Imperium here as Lord Guilliman commanded, or cease our explorations to safeguard what we already have?'

'Sacrifice potential strategic superiority for established, short range capabilities? A difficult set of theoreticals to resolve,' said Casmir. 'A decision of that importance can only be made by Lord Guilliman.'

'What of the Emperor Sanguinius?' said Dantioch.

'Lord Guilliman's orders are clear,' said Casmir. 'He alone is to make decisions on matters pertaining to the beacon, no one else. Not even the emperor would gainsay them without his consultation.'

'And can Lord Guilliman be reached?'

Casmir's mouth twisted. 'Not at this time. The primarch is occupied with matters of state.'

'I sense some dissatisfaction, Casmir.'

Casmir grimaced. 'They will not leave my lord be. Every time the Pharos is fixed upon Macragge, more ships come in. All of them need to be greeted, their occupants appraised. Many of them are suffering from their betrayal. Guilliman attempts to help them all, but not all can be helped, and not all respond well to our way of doing things. Too many of them are at the mercy of their emotions.' He stopped, aware that he spoke ill of their allies. 'I am scheduled to meet with Lord Guilliman later today. I will discuss your concerns with him then. Until then, you are to attempt no further long-range locational attempts. Once today's communications are finished, leave the beacon focused here on the Chapel of Memorial.'

'As you wish, captain.'

'It is not as I wish. I wish this war had never started. I wish your xenos machine could deposit us on the bridge of Horus' flagship so that we could end this war with one stroke. But wishes never brought a satisfactory solution to anything. I am only being practical. Are you ready?'

'Yes.'

'Then I shall leave you to Consul Forsche's tender mercies. Twenty communications today.'

'We shall attempt them all.'

‘You have our thanks. I am sorry to burden you so, warsmith, but the government of the Five Hundred Worlds is dependent on your efforts. If there is anything we can do to ease your task, please have the consul inform me.’

‘Knowing the proclivities of your Legion and Ultramar, I would expect that you are already doing everything you can.’

Casmir bowed. ‘It is so, warsmith.’ He addressed the guard. ‘Consul Forsche may enter.’ A formality, as there were no walls any longer between the chapel interior and the courtyard outside it.

In Primary Location Alpha, Dantioch’s small army of scribes prepared themselves.

Forsche entered, flanked by human members of Macragge’s Praecental Guard. A train of clerks and servants came with him, carrying heavy books, lecterns, tables, chairs and data-slates. A tent was erected within the ruin, portable heaters set up to drive off Macragge’s chill. Quickly and with the efficiency that Dantioch had come to expect of the Five Hundred Worlds, the Chapel of Memorial was ready for the day’s business.

‘Good day, warsmith,’ said Forsche. He was not an old man by mortal standards, but the last months had been heavy on him. His skin was beginning to sag and his dark hair was greying at the temples.

‘I shall leave you to it, other duties call,’ said Casmir. ‘Re-illuminate Macragge by nineteen-hundred hours, Sothan local. I will speak with you then.’ He departed.

‘Where is first on the list today, consul?’ asked Dantioch.

Forsche held up a hand. A clerk brought forward a sheaf of papers bound loosely in a folder.

The consul flipped through the binder and sighed wearily. ‘Orders for the Oligarchs of Thraia,’ he said. ‘Thirty lines. Immediate response required.’

The clerk read out the queries for Thraia. One of Dantioch’s own staff wrote them down. Carantine’s tech-priests adjusted their machines, and redirected the Pharos to the Acropolis of the Demos in Thraia’s capital. Dantioch’s aides had become adept at operating the Mechanicum devices that moderated the xenos technology, allowing Dantioch to concentrate on focusing the communications beam. Sometimes Polux took his place. Three other legionaries besides were being trained in the operation, but none of them had the finesse that Dantioch had developed. When he was on the stage the beam was brought to bear quickly. What took the time was the personnel side of the operation. Human beings were forever the weak link in every chain.

Ships could get to Macragge easily enough by following the light of the Pharos. But they could not easily return home, and so Guilliman had ordered that the Pharos be used for direct communication with his fiefdoms. The Pharos could only be focused on one location at a time. It could not bridge the gap between third parties so that they might be left to get on with their affairs. Therefore the entire administrative business of Imperium Secundus went through the cave at the peak of Mount Pharos. Together, Dantioch and Guilliman had created a timetable, allotting each of the worlds, outposts and fleets of

Ultramar a set time for communication. It worked to a certain degree, but the exigencies of war disrupted this often. If communication from Sotha was not expected, heralds at the focal points had to fetch their masters. Then questions would be taken and answered, replies and reciprocal queries noted down, contact re-established with Macragge, and the matter of the report passed on, discussed with Forsche or others of the High Senate, and if necessary, acted upon.

It took hours. But it was better than nothing.

For the remainder of the day, Dantioch processed the woes of the Five Hundred Worlds. Pleas for aid, reports of minor enemy incursion, and dangerous levels of psychic incidence on two worlds made up the most urgent. Often the petitioners were angry and afraid. Frequently they attempted to get Dantioch to reveal the nature of the device they utilised and asked repeatedly over its provenance and location. Rarely was the news good. Entirely by chance, Dantioch had become the lynchpin that held Ultramar together. Even for a man of his will and dedication, it was mentally exhausting.

A chrono chime cut short the last conference hours later. Dantioch withdrew the beam from the furious Polymarch of Aphos and sent the alien beacon to alight upon the Chapel of Memorial again. After a few words with Forsche, the Officio Ultramara was efficiently disassembled, leaving the chapel's ruin quiet.

Dantioch gritted his teeth as he stood and left the central point of Prime Location Alpha. A day in the chair left him stiff. The play of his muscles and bones as they were reawoken provoked a storm of protest from his nervous system. And still the day's work was not yet done.

Servitors stepped forward unbidden to remove the throne to the side of the chamber. The Chapel of Memorial remained displayed in the focus field. It appeared real. It was real, he reminded himself. Not an image.

Dantioch's officials filed out, leaving a skeleton Mechanicum crew to mind the Pharos' machines. Dantioch looked them over himself and gave his mark to the duty orders, pacing all the while to work the pain out of his back.

He did not notice Polux waiting at the back of the room until he spoke.

'Barabas,' said Polux.

'Ah, you have arrived already.'

'I have been watching the whole session. It is important for me to understand.'

'You saw the purple face of Lord Espon, then?'

'I did. I do not envy you, my friend. I am no diplomat. I would likely have shouted back.'

'I am not a diplomat either. We seldom get to choose our roles.' Dantioch coughed. He could not help wincing and holding his side.

'You should rest, Barabas. Let me take the conference tomorrow.'

'I will be fine, Alexis. I will rest tonight. First, let us go and investigate the damage we

have done.'

'You told them about Inwit, but you did not tell them about my sighting of Lord Dorn,' said Polux, falling in beside his friend.

'I did not.'

'Why?'

'You know why. Do not worry, I will, and I thank you if you will hold your peace. News of that magnitude should only be given to the primarch.'

'Which one?' said Polux. 'These lords of other Legions are strange to me. How we can keep secrets from one at the command of another concerns me. Do we tell the Lion? The Angel? What if Guilliman orders us to keep this from his brothers? We will be complicit in many lies. I do not like this secrecy.'

'To be the master of communication is to know everything,' said Dantioch. 'We are neck deep in the schemes of others. Our time here has been enlightening.'

'To be a warrior again!' said Polux.

'A thought I have often,' said Dantioch wryly.

'This is not the kind of war I am used to fighting,' said Polux. He was as majestic as a god carved in marble, but there was something boyish to his features, and when worried he could not escape an unintended look of petulance.

'As little as I like it, I believe. The Lion's reasoning was sound. To reveal what happened to the neophyte Oberdeii might well have led Lord Guilliman to stop our experimentation.'

'And you hold your tongue now for the same reason, I think.'

Dantioch laughed and regretted it. He coughed loudly, fighting the spasm back down into the cage of hooks his chest had become. 'You know me too well. I meant what I said. I will tell Lord Guilliman, but only face to face. We do not wish to swamp him with rumour before he has the facts before him.'

Polux gripped his friend's arm and turned him gently to face him. Polux was a giant among Space Marines, and towered over Dantioch's injury-twisted form. 'Swear to me that we will not become embroiled in shadow games. I will not become caught in the bickering of brothers. We must tell him. It is too important not to.'

'You might have been seeing nothing, Alexis. Ghosts walk these stages when the Pharos is untuned. Not all of them are–'

'Swear to me,' said Polux. 'Please, Barabas.'

'I swear,' Barabas said. This insistence of Polux's was taxing his patience a little. Through the chamber mouth he could see onto the promontory. The sun shone redly there. 'It is almost sunset. We must hurry if we are to inspect the damage with the benefit of the evening light drain. There is a theory that I wish to put to the test.'

Polux released the warsmith.

‘Very well.’ Polux followed Dantioch from the chamber, carefully matching his speed to his friend’s halting pace.

They followed a twisting route out of Primary Location Alpha. Many branches of Mount Pharos’ cave system had been equipped with walkways to bridge the numerous deadfalls, pits and chasms that broke the network, but not all. The metal shook and rattled on its pins under their feet. Against the smooth lustre of the stone, the walkways seemed primitive. Dantioch chided himself against setting the technology of the xenos above that of mankind, but faced with such evidence it was hard to resist.

For the most part they descended. The shiny black stone of the Pharos’ winding mechanisms closed in on them.

They went as far as they could on the human additions to the system. Five minutes before the sun was due to set, Dantioch unlatched a gate in a section of walkway railing and stepped with difficulty down onto the black rock. Polux tensed behind him, reaching out a hand to steady the warsmith.

‘The stone is not so slick that I will fall, Alexis!’ Dantioch said sharply. ‘I am broken, not helpless.’

‘My apologies,’ said Polux. He withdrew his hand.

Dantioch regretted his words. ‘Alexis, I apologise. A brother should never scold a brother for his concern. Your care makes me aware of my condition, and it is that which angers me, not you. It is I who should be sorry. I am tired. Our burden is great, even for such as us.’ He grasped Polux’s forearm in friendship. ‘Follow me, the section I wish us to inspect is this way.’

They went along the lip of a crevasse whose modest metre width hid a two-hundred-metre chasm. The glassy lip to it and the black, light-absorbent quality of the stone made the edge uncertain, even to a Space Marine’s eyes. A tensioned safety line ran along the wall, harnesses clipped to it waiting to be used, but the legionaries disdained them. They headed further into the mountain, following a tunnel that narrowed minutely but steadily. The crevasse thinned, becoming a fissure centimetres across.

The Pharos’ tunnels were frigid. A constant breeze blew upwards through much of the network, and its defiance of thermodynamics was one of the many strange things about the mountain. Drawn from the warmer lowlands, this air should have held a higher temperature than the air at the peak. But the moment the damp coastal winds entered the structure they became chilled. Humidity was well below its expected levels also. The moisture load of the air dropped with every metre one travelled upward. By the time the wind exited the summit, it had been sucked dry.

They had descended far from Primary Location Alpha, but were still far above sea level. At that altitude most of the moisture had been depleted. The air hooting out of the narrow gap in the floor brought with it a sharp dryness that stretched the skin of the nostrils.

The tunnel grew darker. Soon all that Dantioch and Polux could see were the grey shapes

of each other against pronounced blackness. Every time Dantioch reached out to the tunnel wall and met rock he was surprised, for the place was so devoid of light his eyes told him to expect nothing. For a quarter-kilometre they went, the tunnel narrowing until they had to bow their heads. The gap in the floor became so thin that the mountain wind sang through it with an aggressive melancholy.

They turned a twist in the tunnel and a bright arc lamp suddenly flooded a tall, domed space twenty metres high. A black cavity opened up into a second, identical chamber, side by side with the first so that the rooms formed a structure resembling a pair of lungs. At the centre of the light the constituent mineral crystals of the rock glittered coldly, but the periphery of the illumination was sudden, unnaturally weakened by the stone. The portable generator powering the light buzzed annoyingly. Next to it a servitor stood sentry.

As they approached it swung its entire body round to face them.

'Warsmith. Captain. Greetings.' The voice was human, but devoid of all feeling. Blank eyes as round and silver as coins regarded them. 'What is your command?'

'No command. Continue, Unit 992.'

'Compliance.'

Dantioch led Polux to the wall. 'See, Alexis, here is a damaged section.'

The servitor dutifully waddled aside to allow them close. Dantioch showed Polux a network of pressure cracks crawling up the stone in a pattern similar to the diamond web of a fishing net. Small fragments of shattered stone were trapped in the lines of the web, ready to pop free at the slightest motion.

'Shearing effect. The Pharos shook the mountain,' said Polux. 'I shook it,' he added wonderingly.

'Indeed.'

'Can we repair it, Barabas? Do we even need to?'

'I am not sure, but not because it has no effect on the mechanism's operation. That is why we are here.'

'I do not understand. You are being oblique, my friend.'

'If my hypothesis is correct, you will need no explanation from me once our observation is done. Please deactivate the lamp, 992.'

'Compliance,' said the servitor moronically. It stumped around and shut off the generator with a clumsy hand. The buzzing silenced and the mountain's weight suddenly pressed in. The muted sound of the draughts blowing round its corridors took on the seeming of a mighty respiration, as if Mount Pharos were a giant slumbering away the aeons.

Once, neither Space Marine would have lent credence to such imaginings. Mental images, they would have said, the human mind constantly alive to analogy in its quest for understanding. No longer would they so lightly dismiss these notions – not when the galaxy was plagued by the impossible.

Dantioch checked a chronometer in his mask display.

'Three seconds.'

The stone of the mountain was in all respects ordinary, a fine-grained basalt squeezed from the mantle under an ancient ocean, except where the xenos architects of the Pharos had engineered it into that smooth, glossy black. Light did not shine as it should within the tunnel network. For the most part it was quickly absorbed by the treated stone. At sunset and sunrise, the opposite was true. The song of the mountain was one of the planet's finest spectacles. Dantioch had seen every manner of terror and wonder, and still the light song of the Pharos arrested him.

As Sotha's sun sank below the distant Blackrock Mountains, the last rays of the day hit the westward-facing apertures of Mount Pharos. This light was not sucked away, but reflected, intensified, and re-emitted redoubled.

Golden luminescence ran through the cavities of Mount Pharos, seeming languid as water poured from a ewer. Light slopped round corners, ran down curling tubes, flooded the floors of broad chambers and gleamed from the unknowable depths of the deepest pits. It penetrated every centimetre of the endless tunnels. When it lit upon the great machine hall of the quantum-pulse engines, it shone brightly. Re-energised, it sped on to fill the mountain from top to bottom, save in some few places. There were several enormous voids in the mountain. Into these the light did not go. From within them, it appeared not to shine at all. Dantioch could not calculate how this occurred. And the light's sluggishness was no illusion, it *was* slower – it ran at less than seventy per cent of its usual speed. Dantioch could not even infer from the characteristics of the phenomena their purpose or cause. Neither could Magos Carantine.

But where Carantine grew frustrated – if the blurts of angry binaric he emitted were anything to go by – Dantioch saw something beautiful.

The light rushed into the twin-lobed chamber with an audible sigh.

To experience the effect in Primary Location Alpha was to witness magnificence; to see two worlds hazed by honeyed light was a privilege. To be deep within the mountain during the light song was a different affair, bringing with it an intimacy with the structure that concerned Dantioch. As he had discovered during his recent explorations, when the light bathed his body in the tunnel the calming effect of Mount Pharos reached its fullest, and for a moment he could forget his pain.

Feelings of the righteousness of what he was doing suffused the warsmith, a balm to his tortured soul and body. In his mind's eye he saw himself in Primary Location Alpha, all the mysteries of the Pharos unlocked, and the way open for the Avenging Son to end the war. Horus brought to heel, and the name of Dantioch's own Legion redeemed by his actions…

Fantasies. Mountain dreams. All who spent any time around the peak had them. Only some proved true, and Dantioch was under no illusion whether his would be among them.

He held up his hand before his eyes, shielding them against the glow so that he might

examine the effect upon the stone's fractures. As the golden wash drained through the tunnel into the chamber another illumination flickered around the sharp edges of the cracks: a greenish sparkle emitted by the minerals of the stone.

The event ceased. The light went out. The green sparkle lasted a moment longer, then faded. Dantioch dropped his hand.

'Light, 992!' ordered Dantioch.

The stark light of the lamp snapped back on.

'Do you see?' he said excitedly, running iron-clad fingers over the cracks.

Polux peered at the wall. 'The cracks! They have closed.'

The network of lines in the rock was noticeably smaller. Once joined into a diamond web, many of the cracks were now isolated. All were narrower. The free-standing fragments were no longer jarring imperfections, but had become only cracks themselves, drawn back into the rock.

'This is what I wanted to test. My hypothesis is correct. The material is self-healing,' said Dantioch.

'Has this not been noted before?'

'I have only recently observed it. Strangely, it is not apparent around the alterations we have made to the fabric. No anchoring bolts spat forth or gaps closed where we have cut through.' Dantioch touched the damage. 'But another sunrise, and this will be as good as new. Is it because it is unintended damage, I wonder? Is it another facet of the Pharos' empathic functionality? The more time I spend here, the more amazed I become.'

Polux said nothing. He was more suspicious of the Pharos' mysteries, and of a character where he would not hide his disquiet. 'We should have expected this. The artefact is old.'

'We should. Continents move, seas rise. Stone cracks,' said Dantioch. 'The exterior of the mountain shows every sign of natural weathering, but there is none within.' There were a few places on the surface where the stone had eroded, leaving tube mouths slightly proud of the rock, or exposing their perfectly curved exteriors to the sun. But there was not so much as a chip in the black stone.

'If the Pharos is only a million years old, the mountain will have known its share of earthquakes and cataclysm, and I believe it to be immeasurably older than that.' Dantioch tapped the rock. 'An oversight on all our parts. I thought it only unnaturally perdurable. The finish of the stone is still beyond us. Apparently it is more than merely lasting,' said Dantioch. 'And now we know why. This discovery is important.'

'We can attempt another long-range sounding, if it is self-repairing.' The note of doubt grew in Polux's voice. 'I am concerned by such a capability. What else might it do?'

'Your unease aside, this makes the proposition of incidental damage less of a concern, my friend. But like so much else we have no good idea of the properties of this mechanism. There may be a point it cannot be pushed past. Unit 992, monitor the cracks.

Give me interrupt pict-capture, one image every minute. Then we will be able to calculate the speed at which the damage is repaired.'

'Compliance,' said the servitor. It turned on the spot and stared fixedly at the wall.

'Until then, we had better not do anything rash,' said Dantioch. 'Not until we have had the opportunity to communicate with Lord Guilliman. This is something he should know of, and soon.' He looked up at the wall again. 'Intriguing.'

ELEVEN

Infiltration
Protect the weak
Unacceptable terms

The Legion orbital over Sotha monitored a modest amount of shipping, most of it arriving during a window once every two weeks when the Pharos' path was diffused to its maximum spread in the direction of Macragge. On those days, envoys, adepts, supplies and other vital items and personnel came down the path of light the Pharos beat through the storm to Sotha, their rush taxing the traffic masters.

The rest of the time the Sothan orbital kept watch as best it could through the interference patterns of the alien beacon and the hellish noise of the Ruinstorm. Patrol ships were scheduled to come and go, but little else.

So it was that the unscheduled return of the destroyer *Probity* to Sotha raised immediate concerns.

Effective range of the station's augurs was down to a mere half a million kilometres, but as soon as the *Probity* crossed the marker line, she was spotted. A solid dot coalesced from the jags and blips of scattered light at the edge of the auspex screen. Three Legion serfs saw her at once, and duly brought notice.

Shipping command was notified, the schedule consulted. The *Probity* was not due to return for two weeks.

During those times that his duties did not take him elsewhere, Captain Adallus remained on the command deck. If there was to be an attack, he wanted to see it first, and react to it immediately. Alert for anything amiss, he picked up on the exchange between his deck officers, and listened to them.

'Distance out?'

'Five hundred thousand kilometres and closing fast.'

'Vox command, any communications?'

'I'm struggling to raise her crew.'

'Keep on trying.'

Adallus spoke, his deep transhuman voice punching through the chatter of the mortal men and women on the command deck. He looked to his aides, Sergeant Odillio and Company Vexillary Genus. The men joined their captain. Odillio was grey-haired and thoughtful, Genus younger and sterner.

'Gunnery command, bring all weapons online. All hands to battle stations,' said Adallus. Three siren calls whooped out across the station. 'Give me all information on the *Probity*'s status. Constant update.'

‘On main hololith now, my lord.’

‘Long-range auspex indicates damage to her engines. There’s plasma dumping from the port-side vents. A possible malfunction or battle damage.’

‘Can you determine which?’ said Adallus.

‘Not at this range and with the Pharos operating at its current level,’ said the auspex officer.

‘Lord Captain Adallus, they are attempting to open communications. Their vox is badly scrambled – their emitter array is damaged,’ added vox command.

‘Persist in your efforts until you have raised them.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Minutes passed. The *Probity* drew nearer, a bright star moving swiftly across the red cloth of the storm. Soon the plough-bladed prow became visible on the hololith, then other details behind it. Adallus ordered the tactical display up to full magnification. Through the digital snow of the storm and Pharos, the damage to the ship was evident.

‘My lord! I have something,’ said vox command. ‘Very faint.’

‘Put it onto the main vox. Command deck, all quiet,’ commanded Adallus. A hush fell. The noise of machines and cogitators working became the loudest sound.

‘There is a five-second distance lag on the communication,’ cautioned the vox-officer. ‘And it is badly distorted.’

A humming hiss came from the command deck’s voxcasters – ordinary cosmic interference, twisted by the disturbing throb of the storm.

‘*Sotha? Can you hear me? Sothan orbital, please respond*.’ It was a panicked voice, human. Fatigued and full of terror.

‘This is Captain Adallus. You are in contact with the orbital. State your name and rank.’

A waspish buzz sawed through the air. When it passed, the man was babbling.

‘*…nothing we could do. They’re coming! Oh, by the old gods, they’re coming! We’ve lost everyone. The bridge crew are all dead*.’

‘What is your name?’ asked Adallus.

‘*I am sorry, my lord, we are in urgent need of–*’

‘What is your name?’

The man fell silent. When he spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper. ‘*My lord, I… I am… I am Sub-Pilot Maskell.*’

‘There is a Sub-Pilot Maskell aboard, my lord,’ the dockmaster reported.

‘Mute vox. Do we have voice print records?’ said Adallus.

‘I’m reading a seventy per cent match, but the interference from the beacon is so bad it is

impossible to be certain.'

Adallus nodded. 'Vox-mute off. What occurred, Maskell?'

'*I... I... I...*' The static seemed encouraged by Maskell's panic and hissed louder.

'Remember that you are a servant of Ultramar!' Adallus rebuked him. 'Remain calm.'

'*Night Lords! They were lying in wait for us aboard a derelict. They tried to take the ship. They killed the legionaries. They boarded and slaughtered us. The things they did…*' He broke off into sobs.

'Calm, Maskell! Were there no survivors among the legionary contingent?

'*Three. There are three of them. The rest were slain when the wreck exploded. By the Emperor, it was a trap!*'

'Lethicus boarded a derelict? That does not sound like him,' murmured Odillio to Adallus.

'*Captain Adallus?*' said Maskell. '*Please help us. You are a merciful lord, I know it.*'

'You know me?'

'*Yes, my lord. We have met twice, briefly. You will not remember me*.'

Adallus searched his memory. He vaguely recalled a quiet, apologetic man.

Maskell continued. '*I am sorry, but I cannot bring the legionaries to the vox. They are badly wounded. Two of them have fallen into the legionary sleep. Sergeant Lethicus comes and goes out of consciousness. We are doing our best, but we do not have the Apothecaries' skill*.'

'What of the enemy?' said Adallus.

'*There were not many. Survivors from the wreck. My lord Lethicus called it a desperate act, but they nearly succeeded. They nearly succeeded!*'

'What is your current situation?'

'*We are operating the vessel from the auxiliary command deck. I've enough men to bring the* Probity *in, but all the most experienced officers are dead. They targeted the command deck, killed Shipmaster Gellius, everyone! Such slaughter…*' Maskell tailed away.

'The man's terrified, Adallus,' said Odillio. 'We're losing him.'

'He is not behaving in a manner befitting a servant of Ultramar,' said Genus.

'If he has survived a Night Lords terror strike, we are fortunate that he is coherent at all,' said Adallus to the others. 'How did you drive them off, Maskell?'

'*The legionaries. Six remained with us while my lord Sergeant Lethicus boarded the ship. They fought against the traitors alongside the ship's armsmen. We lost two hundred, but we prevailed. The Night Lords sabotaged our life support, so many died afterwards. We are confined to the auxiliary command deck*.'

‘How many were there?’

‘*Forty. That is all*.’

‘It’s a plausible story,’ said Odillio.

‘Plausibility does not rule out a lie, brother,’ said Genus.

‘Time to station?’ said Adallus.

‘Fifty minutes, if they brake now. If they don’t, they’ll go right past us,’ said auspex control.

Maskell heard this. ‘*We can pilot the ship in, my lords. It can be done*.’

‘We could take the survivors off by Thunderhawk,’ said Odillio. ‘Bring the ship in to high anchor away from the station.’

‘Give me a theoretical on that option, auspex and shipping,’ said Adallus.

‘It is a risk, my lord,’ reported the auspex officer. ‘The vessel is losing power rapidly. Their main core is bleeding out its fuel. We’d have minimal time to bring it into a stable orbit before it takes itself away from us, my lord.’

‘We do not have tugs or tenders sufficient to arrest it,’ said the dockmaster.

‘The Mechanicum ark?’

‘It is too slow, my lord.’

Adallus rested the knuckle of his gauntlet upon his lip. ‘Order them to bring the vessel in. Prepare medicae and auxiliary crisis teams. Send three squads to meet. Release safety warding on corridor weapons systems, station-wide.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Master of Communications, put the system on high alert. My order, priority alpha. This could be an isolated incursion, but we cannot take anything for granted. Not any more.’

‘And the *Probity*?’

‘Allow them to dock, send three squads to meet them. If this is not what it purports to be, we shall be ready.’

Docking concourse beta of the Sothan orbital buzzed with furious activity. Human fire-fighting teams lined up by the airlock doors, clad in thick pressure suits and armoured, fixed helmets. Tanks of suppression foam were at their sides, hoses in their hands. Medicae staff marshalled on the far side of the bulkhead leading into the main body of the station. Dozens of men waited with power-assisted biers for the wounded legionaries, while more carried stretchers for mortal men.

Apothecary Taricus stood with his three brothers in white and blue: Caelius, Artus and their Primus Medicae Hespatian awaited the arrival of the *Probity* in their full power armour. Among their human staff they were immense, gods of healing and war, their battleplate bulky with narthecium gauntlets and specialised medicae backpack units.

‘The *Probity* approaches!’ shouted Hespatian. His voice boomed out of his vox-amplifier at full volume. ‘She has suffered much damage at the hands of the enemy. Many of our brothers are dead, many of our people are wounded. Stand ready. She comes in fast and hard. We may suffer as she berths. Do not hold fear in your hearts! We have taken a vow, all of us, human and transhuman, a vow that transcends the differences between us and binds us as one culture in service of the Imperium. Prepare yourselves, servants of Ultramar, to do your duty!’

‘I am not sure our unenhanced colleagues appreciate such bombast, Brother Hespatian,’ said Taricus quietly.

Hespatian chuckled. As an Apothecary of the Legion he had a superhuman level of gallows humour, and a rich, gravelly laugh to express it. ‘How often has one of us got to make a rousing speech recently?’

‘You are glorious, brother. Chief of our little band of white warriors,’ said Caelius dryly.

‘There’s not much satisfaction in the marshalling of sick-beds out here at Sotha, Caelius, and even less glory. Allow me my moment, it has been too long.’ A vox-chime from the command deck demanded the Primus Medicae’s attention. ‘Hespatian.’

‘*The* Probity *will dock in fourteen seconds, Hespatian. Brace yourselves, the ship is coming in outside safety parameters.*’

‘Understood, Captain Adallus.’ He activated his voxmitter again. ‘Stand ready! Brace for impact!’

Klaxons blared. Emergency lumens activated as power to the main lights was cut. There was no warning before the impact. A tremendous bang echoed down the concourse as the ship connected. Metal squealed on metal and the whole structure of the docking pier vibrated.

The lumen strips flickered, tried to come back on and failed. Dim emergency lighting shone through smoke and fire-suppressant gases. A ruptured power feed cracked and buzzed.

‘Open up,’ said Hespatian, his attitude changing as surely as if a switch had been flicked. ‘Everyone, stand ready.’

The docking portal shuddered, but would not open.

‘A further complication,’ said Taricus. ‘The impact has buckled the doors.

‘What about the *Probity*’s portal? Is it open?’ asked Hespatian. ‘Crisis team forward.’ Auxiliaries ran to the doors, and began a thorough examination.

Banging came from the other side of the door, heavy thumps of metal on metal, the rhythms of panic.

‘*They cannot get out,*’ voxed one of the human deck crew.

‘Do we have a seal on their hull?’ asked Hespatian.

The men at the door applied listening devices and data-thieves to the crumpled metal.

'Seal is at ninety-six per cent,' said the human crisis team leader. 'There is a small leak. There's indications of dropping pressure on their side. Looks unregulated.'

'We'll have to be quick,' said Artus.

'Life support control, prepare to stabilise pressure, docking concourse beta and docking pier,' voxed Taricus.

'Establish a link with the ship. Direct interface with internal voxcasters,' said Hespatian to the auxiliary teams at the door.

'My lord, we have audio only, I cannot make a datalink with the internal augurs.'

'Command?' Hespatian voxed the command deck.

'*The same situation here, Apothecary,*' the reply came back. '*No link acquired to augur or data systems. Vox-link only.*'

'Then that will have to suffice. Engage link, full gain.' A hiss in the Apothecaries' ear-beads announced the connection. 'This is Apothecary Hespatian of the Sothan orbital. We have medicae teams waiting to aid you. All who are able should assemble to disembark. Please prepare officers to guide us to the wounded.'

The Apothecaries listened carefully. There was no reply. The banging grew more frantic.

'Command, are you getting any reply?'

'*Negative, Apothecary.*'

Hespatian cursed softly. 'Stand back from the doors. We shall cut through. I repeat, stand clear from the doors!' Hespatian waited for the banging to subside.

'They heard that, brother,' said Taricus.

'*Probity*, clear your airlock,' said Hespatian. 'Cutting teams, make a way.'

Two more teams of human auxilia rushed forward, carrying two-man melta units between them. They set up their devices, one operating the power unit, the other directing the slot-perforated barrel of the emitter. They set to work carving the station doors apart. Metal glowed under the invisible rays of focused fusion inductors. The air between nozzle and door rippled with heat.

'Once aboard, medicae teams one through five will head aft,' ordered Hespatian. 'The reactor is damaged, their life support is compromised and there have been heavy casualties. Legionaries and officers are your priority. Triage groups will go ahead. Red tags for treatment, black for mercy.'

The men worked rapidly, carving through the station doors just short of the wall. When they were finished they directed heavy servitors with hooked bars for arms into place. Pneumatics hissed on their backs, opening their pries wide. Metal screeched as the doors were forced unwillingly out of their housing.

'That will do,' said Hespatian. 'Servitors back.'

The cyborgs were directed to one side. One of the crisis team placed a weak directional charge at the base and activated it with a hand unit. The explosives detonated with a muffled bang and the doors fell inwards into the station, the ragged, glowing edges cooling to burned black, revealing *Probity*'s cargo portal.

The reported leak in the seal made a high-pitched whistling. It was calmly sealed.

'Clear!' shouted the emergency team leader. His men fell back to the edge of the concourse, leaving a clear avenue for the Apothecaries and human medicae to access the door. Hespatian came to a halt before the airlock.

'It does not look too bad,' said Taricus. 'They did more damage to the station than we did to them.'

'*Probity*, you are clear to re-enter and reopen your airlock portal. We have full atmosphere on our side. Medical assistance is on stand-by to board. Please exit the vessel to the left in an orderly manner. We shall come aboard on the right.'

The doors of the *Probity*'s cargo bay groaned, mechanisms struggling against an obstruction. The sound of over-exerted motors reached an unhealthy volume, then the doors jerked backwards, squealing into their mountings.

The other side was completely dark.

'*Probity*?' asked Hespatian. 'Are your systems down?'

Taricus caught paired glints in the dark.

Eye-lens shine.

Hespatian stepped forward.

'Wait!' shouted Taricus.

Strobing light burst from the ship. Humans cried out as they were dazzled, stumbling back from the glare. A thick white vapour spilled outward, obscuring the view into the airlock. A phage blocker activated, overwhelming the station's vox-network, blasting them all with a cacophony of men in pain. The Space Marines' helm lenses darkened to compensate a fraction too late for the blinding effect, and they were blinking afterimages away when the first of a group of dark figures stepped out onto the concourse.

Their leader levelled a volkite pistol and shot Hespatian through the face.

A wall of bolter fire followed him as he strode onto the station and blasted Taricus through the chest as he was bringing his boltgun up.

Gendor Skraivok holstered his pistol as his warriors jogged past him, slaughtering everyone they came across. He smiled with grim satisfaction behind his snarling helm mask and opened a vox-link to the main fleet.

'This is Claw Master Gendor Skraivok. The docking concourse is ours. Begin main assault.'

Adallus looked on in horror as the emergency crews were cut down by a fusillade of bolts.

His own men traded fire with the Night Lords, but they were faring badly, and were driven back when a Dreadnought came through the portal at a half crouch, stood tall, and opened fire. At least a dozen legionaries came behind the Dreadnought, stepping over bodies onto the orbital: Night Lords, more debased than the last time Adallus had seen them, their night-blue armour festooned with trophies torn from human bodies. One of the enemy looked directly at the monitoring augurs, and all the pict feeds from the docking concourse went dead.

Adallus jabbed an emergency broadcast button, opening vox-channels to everything within range simultaneously. 'Aegida Company! To arms! We have intruders aboard the platform. Numbers unknown, aims unknown. Eighth Legion.' He spun around. 'Get me intelligence! Is this the only force we're facing or the start of something bigger? Vox command, contact the surface! Tell them we've intruders aboard. Someone raise me Warsmith Dantioch by laser pulse and datasquirt. We must inform Macragge!'

'My lord! I've multiple contacts emerging from the far side of the planet,' said the chief auspex officer. He ran from station to station, his eyes widening at what he saw.

'Why didn't you see them?' snarled Adallus.

The man recoiled, white with terror in the face of a Space Marine's anger. 'I'm sorry, my lord! They're coming right down the Pharos interference pattern. I… I…'

Adallus came down to the auspex suite. The pict screens of the instruments were filled side to side by a warfleet a dozen ships strong. He slammed his fist so hard into the console the plastek screen cracked. 'Bastards! Why didn't the picket fleets intercept them? Where have they come from?'

'Theoretical – they disabled all the pickets?' said Odillio.

'Too many to hide, too few to destroy them all,' said Genus. 'We would have had word.'

'Do we have anything nearby that might oppose such a force?' asked Adallus.

'Captain Corvo of the Ninetieth is out on long-range patrol with two and a half companies,' responded the Dockmaster. 'He is scheduled to be at Beremin, and is due to pass Sotha in a week, if he can keep his bearing in the storm.'

'We cannot hold them off for a week. Odillio, Genus – more theoreticals.'

'Our orders, my lord,' said Odillio hesitantly. 'Should we destroy the Pharos?'

'Our given task is to shield it, not spear it, not without a direct order from the primarch at least. We will take that action as the last resort. Be ready to do his will, should it come to it. Arm the cyclonic launchers. Target the mountain.'

'The Eighth are launching attack waves, my lord. Multiple inbound fighter craft on a direct intercept heading.'

'Gunnery control, fire at will!'

The Sothan orbital shook as the gun decks responded to Adallus' orders.

‘What response from Sotha?’

‘My Lord, the Night Lords,’ said the chief vox-officer. ‘They’re jamming us, wide band. I’ve interference right across the spectrum. It’s…’ The man tailed away, visibly shaken.

Adallus brought his anger under control. His mind worked rapidly through theoretical after theoretical. ‘Show me.’

The vox-officer pressed a button with a shaking finger. Terrified screaming blasted out from the emitter built into his station.

‘We’re on our own,’ said Adallus finally. ‘All brothers to battle readiness now. Repel boarders, defend the gun decks. This station must be locked down before the fleet arrives. Vox command, connect me to Arkus if you can.’

‘My lord! There is an incoming communication.’

‘Put it on the vox.’

Floating emitters arranged themselves so that all those on the command deck could hear. The screaming of the Night Lords’ vox-jam flooded every corner of the command deck. The vox-file had been expertly crafted for maximum impact and the voices were horribly clear, individuals in agony, begging to die.

The screaming cut out. For a brief moment, the bridge voxcasters roared out an unintelligible blast of communications from every part of the station and Sotha as the 199th scrambled into action. Then this was again silenced by an overpowering vox-link. The station’s central hololith wavered. The tactical map it projected was replaced by the face of the enemy.

A tall legionary with long dark hair, skin almost as pale as that of Corax’s sons, and eyes with irises so big and dark that they merged into his pupils looked triumphantly at them.

‘*Greetings, Captain Adallus of the Ultramarines. I am Claw Lord Krukesh of the Eighth Legion. Some call me the Pale – perhaps you have heard of me? I am of the Kyroptera, the command–*’

‘I know your structure, traitor.’

Krukesh tutted. ‘*Shall we keep this civilised?*’

‘I would not have called a single man among you civilised even before your treachery.’

‘*Let’s skip to the end of this, then. I demand the immediate handover of the orbital platform. Once we have secured your, ahh… compliance,*’ he said with a nasty smile, ‘*we might negotiate the terms of the surrender of Sotha.*’

‘Never! Who do you think you are, to come here and make such demands?’

‘*I am the commander of nearly twenty thousand legionaries, against your single company. That is who I am*.’

‘I have ten thousand men under arms on the planet. A Titan Legion, and forty maniples of the Legio Cybernetica’s finest war constructs,’ said Adallus.

‘*You are going to have to try harder than that if you want to fool me, Captain Adallus*,’ Krukesh scoffed. ‘*We have been in this system for months, hiding right under your noses! You have, at most, a full company of legionaries. Maybe there are a few other assets, but it is our brothers that count, especially in a case such as this when we have such a disparity in forces. It is of no consequence if you have an army group on the planet. If there are not similar numbers of legionaries, there is a definite mismatch. Surely your canny primarch taught you such a simple lesson early on in your training, or did he omit it, so sure he was that no one would uncover the False Emperor’s lies?*’

‘Every one of my brothers is worth ten of yours.’

‘*Even by that generous estimate, you are still outnumbered two to one. We know everything to take your company apart in moments, everything about this beacon of yours! We have logged every activation, every shift in focus, every time the light on Macragge goes out, every time it comes back on. We have tested your eyes and found them blind, whispered in your ears and found them deaf. Your attention to detail is your greatest weakness as a Legion, for in detail there are patterns, and patterns can be read. You have told us everything we need to crush you. Thanks to your punctiliousness, you have already lost, captain. Face your defeat honourably and I will spare your men much pain.*’

Adallus stared at Krukesh hatefully, his jaw clamped shut.

‘*Do I have your agreement?*’

‘Never.’

‘*I expected you to say that. Very well, allow me to adjust my terms. Surrender without a fight, and we shall spare the civilian populace. You are aware of our reputation. We will refrain from making an example of them, if you choose to comply. They will suffer greatly if you do not, for my Legion is bored.*’

‘And my men?’

‘*An offer to join us. I can promise quick deaths to those who will not, no more than that.*’

Adallus ground his teeth. ‘You are deluded.’

Krukesh shrugged. ‘*In truth I only made the offer so that when I give your people to my men and you hear their screams, you will know that you might have prevented their suffering. That is, when you are not screaming yourself. I look forward to meeting you. Claw Master Gendor Skraivok, the captain of the Forty-Fifth Company, will be with you shortly, I understand. So good of you to let him on board. He has only a short walk to your command deck. I shall–*’

Adallus cut the hololith. ‘I will not waste my time negotiating with these bastards.’

His eyes strayed to the auspex screens. The fleet was far too big for the orbital to deal with.

The screams started up again.

‘Terminate that noise!’ he ordered. ‘We’ll make them regret they ever came here. And

find me Sergeant Arkus!’

TWELVE

Secure the future
The untested tested
Escape

Arkus awoke the instant that battle stations was called. A klaxon started its urgent song. They were under attack.

He was heading for the armour stands in the corner of the room a second later.

For a moment there was calm in his quarters. No sign of anything amiss, and then an explosion blew somewhere and the fabric of the station shook.

Arkus' vox-bead chimed while he was fixing it into his ear. He attached his subvocalisation pick-up to his neck.

'Arkus,' he said.

There was no reply.

'This is Brother-Sergeant Arkus speaking. Go ahead.'

The vox hissed. A terrible screaming came and went.

An unrecognisable voice burst out of the vox-bead unexpectedly and deafeningly. Arkus reduced the volume, and went on calmly collecting his light armour and began buckling it on. His full battleplate occupied a clamp stand next to his Scout gear, but there was not time to get into it.

The vox screeched again, before stabilising.

'*Repeat – Sergeant Arkus, this is Captain Adallus.*' The tense hubbub of the command deck sounded behind the captain's words. '*The Eighth Legion are aboard. We have multiple hostile contacts heading towards the orbital.*'

'I'll be there soon,' Arkus said.

'*Countermand that. Remove the neophytes from the orbital. This is an invasion. We are heavily outnumbered. The Scout cohorts are the future of our company. Keep them safe.*'

Arkus' movements slowed a touch. Such an order suggested the imminent destruction of the company.

'I understand.'

'*Courage and honour, sergeant.*'

The vox-link went dead. The screaming returned, louder than before.

Arkus muted it and pulled his bolter, chainsword and bolt pistol out of the arming locker. He regarded the specialised monitoring auspex he used to keep track of the Scouts' development, but left it behind. The time was past for such considerations.

As a Scout Master, Arkus' quarters were attached to the neophytes' barracks. He opened the shutter onto a room full of bunks. Less than a third were in use. Half of the company's Scouts were engaged in training on the surface, and owing to its sensitive assignment away from Legion recruiting grounds, the auxilia of the 199th was currently understrength.

Arkus was pleased to see the Scouts were up, and helping each other into their armour. They worked quietly and without fuss, diligently checking their weapons and talking little. Oberdeii stood apart from the rest. Dark smudges under his eyes told a tale on his insomnia. He was already battle ready and holding his weapon trained on the barracks door.

The tallest, Tolomachus, went to make his bed.

'Leave it, Tolomachus,' said Arkus.

'It's not an exercise?' Tolomachus was the tallest of the Scouts, the result of early problems with his omophagea. He had an instinctive feel for battlefield medicine, and had it in him to become an Apothecary.

Arkus knew them all intimately, their strengths and weaknesses, their capabilities, their doubts, their personal triumphs. Most would make fine legionaries, and being stationed on Sotha had granted them training opportunities most other neophytes did not enjoy. But they were unfinished. Their implants were mostly in place but had not achieved full functionality. Their indoctrination was almost complete, but that was a minor check to the synthetic hormones raging through them all. Only when their biochemistry was regularised and their growth complete would they be able to fully master themselves and be fitted with their carapaces, a day still months away.

It was too soon for them to fight.

Until they were armoured in the blue plate of Ultramar, they were, in a very real sense, his sons. The station was under attack by Legiones Astartes of the worst kind, and he feared for their survival.

'Oberdeii said it wasn't a drill,' said Tebecai. Milk-pale, Oberdeii's friend – a little unruly, but otherwise with a high probability of legionary acceptance.

'You should listen to him,' said Arkus. 'I said *leave the bed*, Tolomachus! We must leave. Immediately. This is not an exercise. This is war. The station has been infiltrated by the Night Lords. Our orders are to evacuate.'

The Scouts looked up at this, commendably controlled in their reactions.

'We should stay! We should fight.' Solon said this. A stolid, technically perfect candidate, he fit in well with the Legion's ideals, but lacked the imagination to progress far once his elevation was done.

'Solon's right, sergeant,' said Krissaeos. A good shot, but a little slow-witted. Arkus had his doubts whether the boy would pass his final trials.

'We can't abandon our company!' Florian. Smallest of them all, but strong. His implants

functioned perfectly. He was adjusting to his new body better than the rest.

'You are not,' said Arkus. 'You are the future of the Aegida. It is your role to ensure the gene-seed of your predecessors lives on. Wherever you go, there the company goes.'

'Sergeant–' began Mallius. He was keen of mind, that one, the best suited to reconnaissance and he excelled at the Scouts' role because of it, but the same traits made him personally unreliable, too individualistic.

Arkus cut him dead. 'We have our orders. Your speed in preparation is superlative. Let us keep honouring our Legion through exemplary service. We are leaving now.'

'Where?' asked Oberdeii, speaking for the first time.

'The Scout Auxilia gunship in hangar three,' said Arkus.

Without waiting for orders, Oberdeii opened the door to the wider barracks unit of the station, and covered it as his six brothers filed out, bolters ready.

Arkus watched, appraising everything. Their training would not be interrupted by this attack. Making these boys into warriors was his role in the company, and he would not cease until death. He assessed them as they sneaked from the barracks. They were focused, stealthy, weapons ready even as they finished snapping their armour on.

So far, so good.

Alarms blared unceasingly from every corner of the orbital. Weapons fire banged in distant quadrants.

Sergeant Arkus held his finger to his lips, and looked quickly around a corner.

Legionaries in the colours of the Night Lords pounded down the corridor, flashing red warning beacons lighting their armour in sinister colours. The Scout squad readied themselves to fight, but no one came their way. After the last legionary had thundered past, Arkus spoke quietly.

'They are headed for the command centre,' he said. 'They will be too focused on their primary target to pay much attention to the hangars, or to worry about neophytes, if we are cautious.'

Arkus directed his young charges forward, slapping each on the back as they ran on to count them out. Right then, he wished for his full battleplate.

He watched his charges go, keeping low and moving silently as he had taught them.

They paused at another junction.

Florian reconnoitred and nodded back.

'Go, go, go!' whispered Arkus.

They dashed across toward the stairwell. The youths tracked their weapons nervously down both directions of the corridor as Tebecai ducked through the door onto the small landing on the other side.

‘Tebecai, continue on point,’ ordered Arkus. ‘Oberdeii, Solon, bring up the rear.’

Arkus pushed past the Scouts. They all looked to him, they all needed him. They were performing well, but were unsure. He could taste their uncertainty on his neuroglottis.

‘A lack of confidence is your enemy as much as they are,’ he said quietly. ‘Master it, or we will not survive tonight.’

He leaned against the wall, and nodded at Tebecai on the other side of the doorway. The boy gripped his bolter and nodded back. Bolt pistol in hand, Arkus went through the door. Tebecai leaned over the stair rail smoothly to cover his entrance.

The stairwell was empty.

‘We are clear. Quickly now!’ said Arkus.

With a stealth that made Arkus proud, the Scouts jogged down the stairs. All the while he was checking their covering patterns, their expressions, their reactions.

The stairwell opened into a square room, as utilitarian and bare of adornment as the rest of the station. On that level the sounds of battle were muted. The station’s weapons batteries were falling silent one by one. The Night Lords were monsters, but they were efficient. They were enacting a textbook seizure of an orbital facility, command centre and batteries first. They meant to take it intact.

They approached one of hangar three’s small doors. Arkus made sure the Scouts were ready, checking them all for signs of stress. Seven resolved young Space Marines looked back at him. He nodded at them in approval, then input his clearance code to the keypad.

The door clunked as the broad teeth locking it into the deck disengaged. It opened with a sigh of equalising pressure. The hangar was dark and radiated a deep cold. Arkus held his hand up to stay his squad.

‘Oberdeii, Solon, cover me.’

Arkus’ thoughts went to Mallius. His occulobe was lagging behind that of the others in its functionality. The boy would be nearly blind in the hangar. Arkus signalled for him to stay at the door and cover the entrance as the rest moved silently into the wide space of the bay. The temperature interface on the hangar threshold tightened his skin, and the fine hairs of his arms stood erect.

Pallets of machinery and supplies covered in tarpaulins lined the outside edges of the bay. He headed for two pallets placed corner-to-corner and took refuge in the angle behind their cargoes.

There were moorings for six ships in the hangar. Four were unoccupied. A lighter and the Scout Auxilia’s Thunderhawk sat at the far end, powered down, engines cold. The chamber was empty of occupants.

He clicked his tongue softly and waved at the boys. They moved well through the door. Solon stumbled clumsily and lost his targeting line. He would need correcting for that later.

‘Oberdeii, Tebecai, you are to come with me and act as my co-pilot and gunner. As of this moment I am appointing Oberdeii as my second. Is that clear? If I should fall, he is in command.’

Oberdeii looked shocked. He was the youngest, and had the experience under the mountain. Oberdeii did not see what Arkus saw: that his weathering of the incident indicated great strength.

‘Solon, Krissaeos, you will remain on deck, weapons ready. Once we have the primary flight preparations complete, I want you to get Mallius and help him towards the ship.’

‘Yes, sergeant.’

‘Pick a place, good cover. Cover door two.’

‘Where?’ asked Krissaeos.

‘You know enough by now to decide for yourself. Tolomachus, Florian, you remain by the access hatch, and cover door one and the cargo gate.’

‘Sergeant,’ Tolomachus acknowledged.

‘Are we ready?’

They spoke their affirmations resolutely.

Arkus looked them each in the eye. So much hope, so many futures that could be cut short if he made one error.

‘We march for Macragge,’ he said.

Arkus, Oberdeii, Tebecai, Florian and Tolomachus sprinted for the Thunderhawk. The blast shield over the bay entrance was open, the void outside visible through the slight distortion of the atmospheric integrity field. The Night Lords approached in number. Arkus counted three heavy cruisers and a dozen smaller capital ships. They were poorly supported by lighter vessels, and he assumed these had suffered badly at the hands of the Lion, but there was no doubt Sotha was in trouble. If the ships were carrying their full capacity of legionaries, there could be more than twenty-five thousand Night Lords in the system.

Arkus beckoned to his charges. They gathered around the Thunderhawk’s rearmost hatch. They waited for him to speak, their eyes gleaming with the reflected, blinking light of the integrity field’s warning strip.

‘Hangar protocols remain active. Their full activation will draw the enemy to us. We must be through this door as soon as I open it. Do you understand? We will have little time to take flight.’

They nodded.

‘On three. Three, two…’ Arkus reached for the mechanism. ‘One.’

The door opened and the hangar came to life. Servitors, summoned by the ship’s machine-spirit, came out of their coffins. Warning lights came on. Recorded

announcements blared over voxcasters.

Arkus inwardly cursed his Legion's affinity for safety regulations. He was sure if this were the hangar of a Space Wolves or Dark Angels vessel they would be able to leave without announcing it so loudly.

He hustled the Scouts aboard.

'Tolomachus, Florian, to your stations. Oberdeii, Tebecai, with me.'

Oberdeii and Tebecai followed Arkus onto the flight deck. Arkus slipped into the pilot's seat, already activating systems before his back settled against the rest. Oberdeii sat next to him in the co-pilot's seat, Tebecai took the gunner's station behind. The fourth crew space was empty. The seats were sized for Space Marines in full battleplate. The youths would dwarf a standard man, but in the chairs they looked relatively small and frail by comparison.

'Emergency flight preparation. Go. Skip the sub-phases. We need to get off station as quickly as possible.'

The engine, never fully quiescent on a ship like a Thunderhawk, came smoothly online. The reactor thrummed. Systems blinked and chattered, their power coils filling the cockpit with an electric hum.

The station shuddered again, twice, the aftershocks of another large explosion. Arkus suspected the Night Lords were breaching the command section doors.

Gunfire sounded from outside the ship. Arkus punched a button, bringing up an external augur view. A grainy, black and white image showed him Mallius, shooting along the wall towards the hangar cargo gate. The broad doors had been opened wide enough to permit the entrance of a couple of Space Marines at once. A feeble ploy to catch the Scouts by surprise. Bursts of light from boltguns on rapid fire lit up dark-armoured figures coming through the door. The Scouts performed well, catching the Night Lords in a three-way crossfire. One of the enemy fell, and they retreated. Arkus nodded in approval as Mallius smashed the door mechanism with his gun's stock.

Mallius fell back to the other two, and they ran across the deck, firing at the gap in the cargo gate as they went.

Then the integrity field went out, deactivated by the invaders.

The venting of the hangar's atmosphere was virtually instantaneous. Cargo tumbled end over end. The force of it was enough to shake the Thunderhawk. Solon and Mallius somehow stumbled through the hatch. Krissaeos was ripped off his feet. He skidded across the deck plating, catching onto a grille atop a service hatch a second before he was sucked out of the station. The grille went whirling away into space, but Krissaeos caught the shallow lip of the access hole, face contorted with the effort.

'Hold steady, Krissaeos,' urged Arkus over the cohort vox-link. 'You will be forced out into the void. Fill your multilung, keep your eyes closed. We shall retrieve you.'

'Can we?' asked Tebecai.

Arkus did not respond. His hands danced over the Thunderhawk's controls. Engine noise throbbed in the cabin.

'Enemy approaching!' said Tebecai.

Night Lords advanced into the venting hangar, their maglocks keeping them steady in the decompression gale blasting through the open cargo gate.

'Krissaeos, let go!' commanded Arkus.

The Scout did not relinquish his grip.

'Maybe he can't hear,' said Tebecai.

Boltgun fire rattled off the Thunderhawk's tail section, blowing out chunks of its armour. But the plating was too thick to be troubled by small-arms, and the damage was superficial. Engines whined louder as the fans of their ignition chambers built up speed.

'Neophyte Krissaeos, let go, that is an order!' said Arkus.

Krissaeos lifted his head. By chance he was looking directly into the pict-feed lens. With gritted teeth, he let go.

A bolt found him before he exited the hangar, blasting his chest wide open. He hit the vacuum dead, trailing ribbons of freezing blood.

The Scouts watched their comrade pinwheeling away in silence.

'Prepare to launch,' said Arkus.

'I need more time!' said Oberdeii through gritted teeth.

'Stay calm,' ordered Arkus. 'Focus on your task.'

Arkus flicked a dizzying array of switches. Oberdeii helped as best he could. One session in the hypnomat was insufficient preparation to fly such a machine. Fragments of knowledge floated up to the surface of his mind and were dragged back down again before he could seize them and put them to use.

'Get the fuel ignition system ready,' said Arkus.

'I'm not sure how,' said Oberdeii. Even as he spoke his hands went to a board of toggles, and flicked them in a specific order that he was not aware he knew.

'Confirm fuel feed ready!'

'Ready!'

'That is not the correct response form, neophyte.'

'Fuel feed online, sergeant!' said Oberdeii.

Tebecai hunched over the external viewscreens. 'They're bringing up lascannons!'

'Not surprising,' said Arkus. 'Hang on.'

The hangar's vox-system blurted out a series of urgent honks. The blast doors began to descend.

‘I think not,’ said Arkus, slamming the Thunderhawk’s main throttle wide open. Without lifting off, its engines roared and shunted it across the hangar deck as hard as if it had been swatted by the Emperor’s own fury. Fans of sparks fountained off its landing gear as it hurtled towards the closing hangar doors.

A hard jolt sent them off course. Arkus pulled on the sticks, recovering the ship. A blast of red light whipped past the cockpit, punching a guttering crater into the blast doors. Hazard-striped teeth looked to close upon them, and Oberdeii tensed in the co-pilot’s seat.

Then the ship was through and into the void on plumes of gas. Sound from outside ceased, and they were hurled into a deadly maelstrom that played out in eerie silence against the sky.

The three cruisers were at high anchor a few hundred kilometres from the orbital, showers of drop pods falling from them as iron-hard tears that burst into flame when they encountered the upper atmosphere. Glaring shock-fronts formed curved lenses of fire across their shielded undersides. Flights of Thunderhawks flew behind, noses up for atmospheric breaching.

For a moment, the Scouts’ craft went unnoticed.

‘The ships aren’t returning fire on the orbital,’ said Tebecai. ‘They’re not firing on the Mechanicum ark either.’

Arkus grunted, his face tight with concentration. ‘Then give me a theoretical, lad. Tell me why.’

‘They want them undamaged?’

Arkus nodded. ‘That is as good a guess as any. This attack will not go unnoticed. Warsmith Dantioch will inform Macragge via the Pharos. As soon as Lord Guilliman hears of this, the Night Lords will have the best part of a Legion to deal with. Their fleet will not stand against a full retribution force, so they will want to capture as many of our guns as they can, and turn them on our brothers as they arrive.’

‘We should have stayed to fight,’ Tebecai muttered.

‘You were given a direct order, neophyte, and with good reason. You will do more good on the surface than up here. We will not be able to stop the Night Lords taking the orbital, but there are other considerations. The Night Lords exercise their unspeakable appetites on the civilian population. You Scouts know the terrain better than anyone. If any of our people are to survive, then they will need your guidance. Our mission is to harass the enemy where we can. Withdraw. Go to ground. Attack again. Protect the colonists until such time as Lord Guilliman arrives to teach these bastards the error of their ways.’

‘But without the Pharos to guide him, the journey could take months!’ said Tebecai.

‘If he gets here at all,’ said Oberdeii.

‘The primarch *will* get here. You have had the privilege of meeting our father. Do you fear that crossing the storm is beyond him? Put those thoughts away! He will prevail. Whether or not you are alive to see vengeance is down to you, do you understand?’

‘Yes, sergeant,’ said Tebecai. Oberdeii gave a tight nod.

‘If you pass this test, you will have proven yourselves. You will be Legiones Astartes entirely, forged in the crucibles of war. Not many recruits can claim that. Try to stay alive.’

‘We will,’ said Oberdeii.

‘Yes, sergeant,’ said Tebecai.

‘Now prepare yourselves – we have been spotted. Three superiority fighters, Xiphon-class. Our first test begins now.’

THIRTEEN

Night sounds
Psaltery's lament
Fire in the sky

Vitellius poked a stick into the fire, sending up a storm of orange motes. Beyond the circles of the platoon's campfires, the Ruinstorm bathed the forest in a febrile blood-glow. Two thousand metres below them, Sothopolis' grid tentatively embraced the land with neat lines of streetlamps. Far to the west were the powerful lights of the spaceport. A glow on the slopes below their position marked the castellum.

Much of Sotha was untrodden by human feet, and no lights shone in the endless wilderness beyond the mountain. The sea was dark with mystery. For Mericus, raised on a planet whose skies glowed with wasted light, the darkness was incredible, and unnerving.

Sotha did its best to make them feel as if humanity was there on sufferance. Insects sang their songs loudly and relentlessly. The calls of nocturnal avians whooped out of the deeper forest, and every so often the crackling of larger animals made the men look to the gloom. Phantines had been extirpated from the mountain, but they came in frequently from the deeper forests, seeking to re-establish their old territories.

Life made a constant din throughout the night, and it was the trees themselves that were the most vocal. At night the plants did their growing. Quicktree wood cracked as it swelled. Creepvine leaves rustled upward, impatient for tomorrow's dawn.

'I don't like the tree talk,' said Govenisk. The sergeants shared a fire with the lieutenant, giving the men a rest from their presence. Half a dozen campfires dotted a clearing around a cave mouth, upon a gently tilted slab of rock. The bare stone was free of Sotha's vigorous flora. Chatter and laughter rose over the fires with the woodsmoke.

'I never thought to see trees grow,' said Mericus. 'I mean *actually* grow. Right before your eyes.'

'It's not like this on your world?'

'Where I was born? There were plenty of trees, but they grew slowly. Although,' he added, 'I can't speak for anywhere else.'

'What about you, captain?'

'Me? The same as Mericus. Back on my world, trees grow slowly.'

'Mericus is wrong anyway,' said Bolarion.

'How so?'

'You can't see them, it's dark,' said Bolarion.

'Pedant. You can certainly hear them.'

Bolarion grinned. He passed Mericus a flask, which he took appreciatively.

Mericus enjoyed his stints as soldier; the comradeship, the patrols deep into the wilds. Not that he was going to own up to it. If he looked too keen he'd be shipped off-world to fight in a proper war. As far as his limited plans for life went, that particular item was not on the list.

The fire snapped and popped, the death of trees singing out to the living boughs. Govenisk hunkered down lower. 'I'll be glad to get home,' he said. 'The mountain shaking like that. I don't like it. No good will come of it. They could have at least warned us.'

Bolarion slapped him on the back. 'Gov! You're a misery and no mistake, always grumbling about something.'

'I'm a realist,' said Govenisk. 'The galaxy's finished. You're the fools, laughing it up like there's nothing wrong with the sky.'

'Drink some of this, then we'll see how realistic you are.'

Govenisk scowled, but took the flask anyway.

A group of men detached themselves from the camp, and an expectant hush fell. The noises of the forest pressed in harder.

A few moments later, the faint notes of a psaltery groaned out from the hollow in the side of the mountain.

'Damn it! The men know they're not supposed to be in there,' said Vitellius.

'Leave them be, Vit,' said Mericus. 'That cave is a dead end. It doesn't go anywhere. The music is good for morale. It's all we've got here on the mountain. No picts, no writing – nothing recorded, as per Lord Guilliman's orders. Don't stop the music. They're not doing any harm.'

'You can't know that,' said Vitellius.

'I can't know,' said Mericus. 'But I can feel it. You ever notice that?' He looked to the other two sergeants. 'The way things feel up here? Calm on a good day, tense before a storm, threatening when there's a phantine about?'

The other two nodded. 'Yeah,' said Bolarion. 'It's the mountain.'

'So, if it was bad, we'd know about it,' said Mericus to Vitellius.

Vitellius looked over at the glossy cave opening. The treated stone sucked in most of the light, but mineral crystals winked here and there invitingly in the grey rock around it. Outside, white quicktree trunks stuck up like the peg teeth of a quarian. Judging by the height of the new growth, the clearing teams had been there six months ago. The saplings between the stumps were already twice the height of the men.

'I suppose it doesn't matter too much,' said Vitellius after a while.

Mericus smiled broadly. 'There you are! Remember when you first came here, Vitellius, what a stickler you were?'

Vitellius poked at the fire.

‘A typical Macragge man – all rules,’ said Bolarion. ‘Now look at you. You’re almost relaxed.’

The other sergeants laughed.

‘The mountain affects us all,’ said Vitellius.

‘Except Govenisk!’ said Mericus.

Vitellius smiled. ‘I shouldn’t put up with this.’

‘But isn’t life so much more fun now that you do?’ said Mericus. ‘It’s called “having friends”. Although I suppose you must have friends on Macragge. Time with them is probably timetabled in.’ He took papers and dried leaf out from one of his pouches. There were a number of plants on Sotha that made for pleasant smoking. He rolled himself a stick, and offered the leaf around.

‘Filthy habit,’ said Vitellius.

Mericus took a burning twig from the fire and lit his smoke. ‘Life’s too short to live purely.’

‘Aren’t you the living proof of that?’ chuckled Bolarion.

‘True, true. I wonder often how by Terra I got sent out here.’

‘The lords of Macragge don’t do anything without good reason, Mericus,’ said Vitellius. ‘If you’re here, it will be for some purpose. A scribe somewhere will have looked down a chart on his parchment and said, “What Sotha really needs is a self-satisfied braggart, that should achieve optimum social cohesion,” and off you go.’

All of them laughed at that.

‘See?’ said Mericus. ‘Even you see it’s ridiculous.’

‘Not really. There will be a reason you are here, Mericus. A good one. You’re a number in an algorithm. It mightn’t make sense to you, but Roboute Guilliman does not like to leave anything to chance.’

They fell quiet awhile. Mericus stood up and threw his finished smoke into the fire.

‘Well, gentlemen, I need to see to a little business. Then I think it may be time to turn in. I’m looking forward to finding a nice hard root to not sleep on.’

He went to the edge of the rock slab. The stone pavement stretched on for forty metres before a sharp angle turned it into a cliff. From the top he got a little privacy and a stunning view of Mount Pharos’ foothills marching down to the plain.

He remained there for some moments, listening to the melancholy wail of Sothan music echoing from the mountain. The strange finish to the stone of the cave dulled and amplified the music simultaneously, taking away the sharp edges and adding an indefinable eeriness to it. The tune was sad, as most Sothan airs were, and fitting to the storm-tinted vista. The tiny square of the orbital gleamed directly overhead, a steady light

in the red of the night sky. Beside the orbital a single star shone, so brightly its rays danced on the swell of the distant sea. That was Macragge, lit up by the strange machinery of the mountain. Looking at it made the roil of the storm less fearful, somehow.

Mericus turned back to the fires, thinking already of his sleeping roll, but then something caught his eye that put all thought of rest from his mind.

There were lights in the sky.

He frowned. There had been no stars beyond the systems of Ultramar in the skies over Sotha for nearly two years, only the pale, ruddy rage of the Ruinstorm. And these stars were moving…

He hurried back to his fellow officers. The lights weren't visible from the campsite, but he crouched and spoke quietly, careful not to alarm the men.

'Give me your field glasses,' he said to Vitellius.

'Sure. Why?'

'I think we've got a problem.'

'What's got into you?' said Bolarion. 'See a big spider?'

Mericus gave him a look that killed the smile dead on Bolarion's face.

'Vitellius, are there any fleet movements due?'

Vitellius shrugged. 'Not that I'm aware.'

'Supply fleet, or Legion? They'd tell you if there were a lot coming in, surely?'

'No one's mentioned anything,' frowned Vitellius.

Mericus spoke urgently. The others had picked up on his worry, and listened closely. 'You better look at this, all three of you.'

'There are ships?' said Govenisk.

'Keep your voice down!'

'There are ships coming and going all the time,' said Bolarion.

'Yes,' said Mericus, 'but not this many.'

He led his comrades from their fire, where they slapped their arms at the cold of the mountain night. Their complaints ceased when he pointed upward. Against the rubicund light of the storm, an ordered constellation moved purposefully towards the orbital.

'There must be dozens of them!' said Govenisk.

'They are coming in outside of the normal approach,' said Mericus. He pointed. 'Look. They're coming at the station obliquely. That's not a normal anchoring vector.'

'You can't be sure,' said Bolarion, but his protest was a token one. The size of the fleet troubled them all.

'Doesn't it strike you as odd?' said Mericus.

‘Damn it,’ said Vitellius. ‘Men! Get those fires out!’ he shouted. ‘Platoon, to arms!’

The music stopped. Men grumbled about the pointlessness of drills and over-eager off-world officers, but stamped out the fires, grabbed up their gear and dived into cover. The last embers burned out, and the darkness flooded out of the woods. The light of the Ruinstorm lit upon the clearing, turning the leaves around it a glossy red-black. It reminded Mericus of blood in moonlight. Foreboding gripped him. Questions came from the dark woods.

‘Lights in the sky! Fleet approaching,’ said Vitellius. ‘Shut up!’

The lights sailed at low orbit in ghostly silence. The lesser craft were bright globes of albedo shine, catching rays from the hidden sun. The capital ships were small, indistinct shapes marked by their running lights.

‘They’re going too fast to take up anchor. That’s intercept speed,’ said Govenisk.

A wailing went up from Sothopolis.

‘The sirens,’ said Vitellius.

The ships passed overhead. Their shapes became firmer, silhouettes against the storm.

They sailed over the peak of the mountain.

‘It’s an exercise, surely?’ said Bolarion.

‘Try the vox,’ Vitellius hissed.

His vox-bearer knelt to the task. The sharp click of dials snapped through the clearing. ‘It’s dead, sir!’ he reported. ‘I’m getting nothing. Hang on, here’s–’

A sudden shriek leapt out of the apparatus.

‘Screaming?’ said Govenisk. His face betrayed his shock. ‘They’re screams!’

Mericus gave Vitellius a questioning look as sounds of agony echoed around the campsite.

‘Shut it off!’ ordered the lieutenant, catching Mericus’ meaning. The noise cut out.

Flashes of false lightning burst across the heavens as the Legion orbital opened fire. Bright points of missiles, the short-lived lines of las, all eerily silent in the void overhead.

‘That’s not an exercise,’ Mericus murmured. ‘This sounds like what happened on Calth. It’s an attack.’

The ships slowed, spread out. The roiling explosions of detonating warheads and annihilated matter preceded shield flares so bright that hard shadows leapt from the forest. Beads of light shot from the invading force towards the station.

‘Why aren’t they returning fire back at the platform?’ asked Bolarion. ‘A fleet that size could smash it out of the sky.’

‘Boarding craft,’ said Mericus. ‘They mean to take it.’

‘Who are they?’ said Govenisk.

‘That’s not something we need to worry about.’

‘So what do we do?’ Govenisk asked. The men were watching in hushed silence. Pinpoint lights were closing on the orbital from the west.

‘That’s the real question, isn’t it?’ said Mericus.

‘We must move lower down the mountain,’ said Vitellius decisively. ‘Sothopolis will be evacuated, we must be there for the population.’

‘And our families,’ added Bolarion.

Mericus nodded. ‘Best not do anything hasty.’

Ten minutes later, a silent column of men filed out into the forests on the mountain, while the thunder of treachery tore apart the skies of their world and sirens wailed up from the city.

After little over a century of mankind’s stewardship, war had come to Sotha.

PART TWO
INVASION

FOURTEEN

Lessons in flight
Re-entry
The forests of Odessa

The fighters peeled off from the main attack force and came in pursuit of the Thunderhawk. Arkus opened the throttles as far as they would go, aiming directly for the planet to harness its gravity to their need. Being dedicated fighter craft the Xiphons were far quicker than the gunship, and gained on it with tremendous speed.

Explosions bloomed all around the Thunderhawk. Arkus threw the ship into a punishing series of evasive manoeuvres that slammed the Scouts into their restraints.

'Tebecai, open fire!'

The Scout brought the ship's weapons system to bear on the interceptors. Soundless flashes burst into the cockpit as he turned the wing-mounted heavy bolters back and fired on the Xiphons.

'I can't draw a target on them!'

'Their destruction is not the primary practical. Keep them away from us.'

'They're splitting and coming round,' said Tebecai. One interceptor hung back, the others jetted past the Thunderhawk at full burn and diverged. They went out dozens of kilometres, looping round to perform a head-on attack run. Light flashed as their rotary missile launchers opened fire.

'Countermeasures!' shouted Arkus. Oberdeii worked his controls, trusting to his hypnotically inculcated learning to guide his hands. To his amazement they moved surely, and his confidence grew. Chaff burst in wide clouds of glittering ribbons all around the Thunderhawk.

Explosions bloomed as the missiles detonated short of the ship, the blasts rocking it with their proximity. Warning lights flashed and alarms peeped. Oberdeii ran his eye over the endless banks of instruments. They made more sense now, even if he understood less than half of what he saw.

'Do they want us alive?' breathed Tebecai. 'I've heard stories…'

'Probably, lad – they never were a good Legion,' said Arkus. 'Obsessed with bloodshed and torture. Their arrogance and sadism plays to our favour, for the time being.'

A flickering discharge of static flared around the craft's nose as they hit the upper part of Sotha's thermosphere. The ship juddered, bouncing around on the thin air. The jolts smoothed out, becoming a steady growl that grew to a roar. Heat glare flickered around the ship's leading edges, getting steadier until it burned with a hot, white light.

'This will buy us some time,' said Arkus. 'They will not be able to fire their missiles at

us during re-entry, and the heat of it will confuse their other targeting systems.'

'So they won't be able to hit us?' asked Tebecai.

'There will be a brief window of safety while we breach the upper layers of the atmosphere, neophyte,' said Arkus. 'Once we commence true flight, they will come for us again. Then they will certainly hit us. They are traitors, but they are still legionaries, and their craft outmatch our own.'

The roar of the atmosphere became deafening. The glow of heat spread further along the ship. The temperature rose.

'This situation is outside your current level of indoctrination, so listen. Standard operating procedure during atmospheric penetration is to raise the nose, and take the craft in ventral aspect first,' explained Arkus, calmly as if he stood at the front of the class in the cohort lyceum. 'The profile of the ship in this orientation acts as a large airbrake. The drag from the atmosphere is larger, and so the ceramite shielding is thickest upon the underside.'

Oberdeii looked at his sergeant in disbelief. Under fire and affecting a perilous re-entry, he was still instructing them.

'Today, we are landing under sub-optimal circumstances. In this particular instance, however, the later we engage atmospheric engines, the better. Next time you do this, do it as I have just described, not as I am about to perform.'

Arkus angled the nose steeply down. The ship groaned under the stress. Metal creaked. Fire streaked from its overheating prow as it plunged into the atmosphere like a javelin. If the fighters still followed them they could not see, for the Thunderhawk's senses were blinded.

The armourglass canopy blackened around the edges. One pane's outer layer cracked with a sound whose softness belied the risk it posed. Oberdeii reached out against the push of acceleration for the lever that would close the shutters.

'Leave them!' said Arkus. 'We need to see. Never trust to machine senses when you might use your own eyes.'

'The glass is breaking,' replied Oberdeii. The noise of superheated air howling over their hull was as loud as a blast furnace.

'If we cannot see when we initiate atmospheric flight, we will die,' said Arkus. 'If you should have learned one thing from my tutelage, it is that survival in war is only seventy per cent preparation and training. The rest is luck.'

The temperature rose and rose. The forces engendered by their immense acceleration pushed the Scout back into his flight seat, taxing Oberdeii's immature physiology. The seconds passed and more systems spoke their shrill language of bleeps and ringing, until it seemed that every machine in the cockpit cried out in alarm. An explosion rocked the ship, tilting it to the left.

'What was that?'

‘Heavy bolter shells cooking off in the wing mount. We have overheated them. Jettison the others. That panel there.’

Arkus pointed at a bank of square black buttons. Tebecai reached for them.

‘We approach the surface too rapidly.’ Arkus watched a number of gauges intently. ‘Look at these instruments. We are at the edge of the craft’s tolerance. I will now pull the craft out of its dive. Prepare yourself for renewed engagement.’ He punched out a complicated pattern on a number of controls. Another roar joined the rush of the atmosphere. Braking jets fought ferociously against the relentless draw of gravity.

‘Oberdeii, close off the rocket motors and open up the air intakes for the jet chambers.’

Oberdeii hesitantly reached for a control array.

‘To your left, lad!’

Oberdeii did as instructed. Chimes sounded. Lights turned from green to red to green.

‘Take the controls and help me bring the nose up. We need to level out. Our only hope is to get down into the forests. In the air we lack the agility to evade those interceptors. Never pit a gunship against a superiority fighter if you might avoid it, it is a poor practical.’

Oberdeii gripped the Thunderhawk’s control sticks. At a nod from Arkus, he pulled back upon them with the sergeant. The sticks fought him every step of the way. As he understood it, the ship’s controls operated through wires rather than mechanical attachment, but feedback motors built into them allowed a pilot to feel what forces his ship fought against, and it seemed like he was wrestling the whole of Sotha.

Arkus made a wordless noise that transformed into a shout of triumph as the nose of the Thunderhawk struggled upward and the ship levelled out. The fires blinked out, replaced by streaming clouds that glowed blue and red in Sotha’s night.

‘Well done, neophyte. We live for a few seconds more.’

Such a display of emotion from Arkus revealed what peril they had been in.

‘Ignite the jets. Activate the atmospheric wing surfaces. Get us flying rather than falling.’

Oberdeii reached to obey.

A series of huge bangs rocked the ship, opening up rents in the side of the cockpit. Air blasted them. Tebecai gave a shout of surprise. The craft pitched to the side. Oberdeii reacted automatically, levelling out their flight. Only when he was done did he see Arkus slumped forward over the pilot’s console, his face blackened.

‘They’ve found us,’ said Tebecai grimly.

A shape whipped past the cockpit. All they saw of their deadly pursuer was a blur and the fires of its engines as it blasted on into the red-stained night.

‘Find the others,’ said Oberdeii. ‘Keep them off us.’

‘I can see only one. I can’t see the others,’ said Tebecai, with an edge to his voice that

Oberdeii didn't like.

Wind whistled in through the gash in the cockpit. Loose hull plates rattled in the fierce air wash. Blue smoke poured out from under Sergeant Arkus' slumped form. Oberdeii feared it was burning him. He reached out a hand but he could not move his mentor from the smoke, and the ship yawed dangerously for his lack of concentration. The noise from the breach was tremendous, a hurricane that threatened to tear Oberdeii's skin from his face.

'Stay calm. See if you can keep it off our backs,' he said to Tebecai.

Oberdeii adjusted his grip on the flight sticks. Half-learned knowledge shifted around in his head. He almost understood how the Thunderhawk operated. Frustration tore at his self-control.

Tebecai got up from his seat and pulled Arkus off the smouldering pilot's station. He was unconscious, his face black and red raw, a charred wound low down on his left side.

Tebecai opened his mouth to speak.

'Don't say it,' said Oberdeii.

The sticks leapt around in Oberdeii's hands like living things. He pushed the levers that should have operated the wings' in-atmosphere control surfaces. Servos motors in the right complied obediently, but those for the left were unresponsive. With the right flaps extended and the left locked shut, the ship went into a pronounced downward spiral. Oberdeii hurriedly reset them, wrenching the stick hard to level out the craft. He managed to halt the spin, but without any way of controlling the form of the wings, the Thunderhawk flew through the atmosphere with all the finesse of a clay brick.

'They're coming around again!' said Oberdeii.

Tebecai half fell back into the gunner's seat. He responded with a lack of control, firing off the Thunderhawk's forward lascannons. The enemy aircraft jinked and the lasbeams went wide, their intense light slashing the clouds.

Oberdeii tried not to think about it, letting his mind go clear, trusting to his embedded knowledge to carry them through. The craft shook. He glanced to his left.

'Reroute the control input through the back-up systems.'

Tebecai searched for a moment for the correct system panel. Grinding noises came from the left wing, but Oberdeii engaged the flight control surfaces again. This time, both responded, and he found himself flying the craft rather than fighting it.

Sotha's night spread under them. Artificial light was ordinarily restricted to the settlement, its castellum, and the tiny landing fields. The deeper forests on the edge of the Odessa region were mottled shades of darkest blue and black, the distant Blackrocks a stout wall, dark red highlights picked out on their crags by the Ruinstorm.

That night orange fires blotched the forests and fields around Sothopolis, and the tiny city's streets glittered with the exchange of fire.

‘How can we help the civilians? We won’t last long down there.’

‘We can’t. I’m going to set us down past the mountain,’ said Oberdeii. ‘We’ll examine possible practicals there.’

His hands shook as he flew the Thunderhawk. At any moment his half-learned knowledge could slip from his mind. It did not fail him, and his hands continued to move independently of his conscious thought.

Mount Pharos grew in front of them. From space it appeared an insignificant bump on the earth, but now it grew and grew, taking on its true proportions; huge and forbidding.

‘Where’s that fighter?’ asked Oberdeii.

‘I can’t get a view on it. The Pharos is blinding the auspex.’

‘At least they can’t see us,’ said Oberdeii. ‘Get down below and tell the others to prepare themselves.’

Tebecai undid his harness, bouncing with the occasional sudden movement of the Thunderhawk as it passed through thermals coming off the burning forest.

Oberdeii hunted about for a safe place to land. The cohort had spent a lot of time in the forest between Mount Pharos and the Blackrocks. He could not recall seeing a clearing so far out. In any case, the trees of Sotha grew at a speed that bordered on the ridiculous. If there had been a clearing a month ago, it would not be there now. The forestry teams from Sothopolis had enough to do keeping the various apertures of the Pharos open, and no serious attempt had been made to clear the woods beyond what the colony needed to grow its food. The hilly terrain behind the Pharos was unbroken canopy. Only up the mountains did altitude force the vigorous trees to give up their dominion.

Oberdeii glanced repeatedly at the auspex screens for a promising landing site. The visual feed was a striping of bruise-coloured blurs. The subtler inputs of thermal and sonic imaging were scrambled.

The landing gear of the Thunderhawk squealed as it extended, damaged by their hasty take off. Oberdeii opted to put the ship down directly into the trees.

It quickly became apparent he had not chosen the best practical.

So fierce was the competition for light on Sotha that the quicktrees did not stop growing until they collapsed under their own weight. The speed of their growth made them useless for timber, for their wood was wet and stringy and lacked a lignaceous structure. Instead they relied on hardened tubes encased in a soft pith for support, rather like the *bambu* of Old Earth turned inside out, or so Oberdeii had been told.

The trees caught on the undercarriage with a series of wet, slapping cracks. At first the momentum of the ship was enough to snap the trees or brush them aside, but the trees clogged the front landing claw as wet grass clogs the machineries of harvest, swiftly arresting the ship’s forward motion. The nose pitched down. Oberdeii fired the forward jets to keep the ship from flipping over, unintentionally robbing it of its remaining momentum. At that moment, the Thunderhawk ceased to fly and fell so suddenly Oberdeii

was too shocked to fire its vertical landing jets.

A spine-breaking jolt announced their arrival on Sotha.

Oberdeii winced. The ship was tilted at an uncomfortable angle forward and to the right. The urinous stink of scorched quicktree stung his nose.

Tebecai appeared at the cockpit door, Tolomachus with him.

'What the Throne was that?' said Tolomachus.

'A landing?' said Oberdeii.

'Shut off the engines!' said Tolomachus, hurrying forward. 'You'll set the forest on fire and signal the enemy.'

Oberdeii faltered finding the controls. Tolomachus pushed him aside.

'Arkus should have had me up here with him,' he said as he deactivated the engines.

'You wouldn't have done any better,' said Tebecai.

'Yes I would, I–' Tolomachus' protests dissolved into horror. 'Arkus! What happened? How is he?'

'I don't know,' said Oberdeii. He released himself from the co-pilot's station.

Tolomachus pressed his fingers against the sergeant's neck. He turned him slightly, his nose wrinkling at what he saw. 'He's alive, but he won't last long with a wound like that. He's got a hole in him like a fist.' He peered inside. 'Cauterised front to back. He's not bleeding.'

The three Scouts looked at each other.

'Is this it?' said Oberdeii. 'Just we three?'

'Solon's downstairs, getting the gear free. Florian isn't going to survive. We got hit a couple of times in the passenger compartment. It's a mess down there.'

Neither Tebecai nor Oberdeii had noticed these hits in the panic of the descent.

'Mallius?'

'He's with Florian.'

'Lucky for us we got hit when we were in the atmosphere, or we'd all be dead,' said Tolomachus. He glowered at Oberdeii. 'Sergeant Arkus made you his second. What are your orders?'

'It doesn't have to be like that. We can confer,' said Oberdeii.

Tolomachus bared his teeth. 'No, no, Oberdeii. With no chain of command we'll be arguing like the senators of Old Macragge when the Illyrians burned the civitas down. Arkus appointed you, for better or worse. What are our orders?'

Oberdeii looked at his fellows. By human standards, they were malformed. Their faces were swollen with hyper-hormonal activity, features budding grotesquely directly from

boyhood to godhood, avoiding something necessary and human in the process. They were not boys, not men, nor were they Space Marines. Not yet. He sighed uncertainly, but as he spoke his voice became surer, theoreticals and the practicals they spawned chaining rapidly in his enhanced mind.

'Get Sergeant Arkus out of here. Find a bier. Make one if the ship's are done. As long as he lives, we take him with us. Have everyone out and ready within the next two minutes. It won't be long before they find the wreck. We need somewhere to hide, and work through theoreticals.'

'What about Florian? He's taken a spar through his chest. It's grazed both hearts, so far as I can tell,' said Tolomachus. 'He is holding on, but only just. We cannot move him. We cannot leave him, not for the Eighth to find. What should we do?'

They all knew what had to be done. Tebecai's face was even paler than usual with the thought of it. He looked to Oberdeii, pleading with him to relieve him of the need to volunteer. Oberdeii felt sick as he spoke. Intellectually he understood that command was an awful burden. To be confronted with it like this was a fist to the guts.

'Give him mercy,' he said.

Tebecai didn't move. 'I…'

Oberdeii felt a rush of anger at their position. Hotter and stronger than any emotion he had felt before. He fought to control the urge to punch Tebecai, the ship, anything. The fine muscles in his face fluttered, then it passed.

'I will do it,' he said. He looked into the darkness of the ship's lower deck. His hand went for his knife.

'No, you won't,' said Tolomachus. He took Oberdeii's wrist, preventing him from drawing his blade. 'You concentrate on keeping us alive. Let me worry about the dead.'

Oberdeii nodded his thanks. Tolomachus took a deep breath, and headed down.

Silence for a moment, then a shout. Florian knew what was coming.

'Do it,' he said, his pain-wracked voice loud enough to carry into the cockpit.

Mallius cried out in alarm when Tolomachus drew his knife.

Oberdeii looked at the floor until the shouting stopped.

The Scouts went out into the forest, leaving the crashed Thunderhawk and their dead comrade behind. From the outside the damage to the hull did not look too bad. Oberdeii supposed it might fly again if it were taken into the company forges for repair.

The vegetation around the Thunderhawk had been squashed into a springy mat that was treacherous to walk on, but it had cushioned their landing, and the ship was more hidden than Oberdeii had expected. The support of their neighbours removed, the trees bordering the crash site had leaned inward and so the furrow carved by the Thunderhawk was very narrow. It would be hard to get a visual fix on the downed ship's location, although a sweep with a light intensifier or thermal augur would reveal it in seconds. He supposed the

enemy were busy elsewhere. The sky and forest were quiet.

'We've got to move,' he said quietly.

His cohort were around him, their faces freshly streaked with camouflage paint, weapons ready. Solon and Tolomachus bore Sergeant Arkus on a bier retrieved from the ship. White eyes gleamed in the forest dark. Not far away, a lumbering phantine boomed out a mating song, ignorant of the disaster befalling its world.

'We should head back to the castellum,' said Solon.

'We can't do any good there,' said Oberdeii. 'The enemy are there with overwhelming forces. Our mission is to protect the civilians as best we can and harass the Eighth Legion where possible.'

'Then we should head into the caves,' said Tebecai. 'That's where the survivors are supposed to go. We should go back to Sothopolis and act as escorts. Those were the sergeant's orders.'

Oberdeii shook his head. 'We have come down too far away. If the Sothans are going to make it to the caves, they already have. By the time we make it back it will be too late to save any in the town, and there is little need to guard those already in the caves,' said Oberdeii. 'We should reverse the order, harass as a primary, rescue where possible. The men of the Emperor's Watch will protect the Sothans. We're going to the mountain to present ourselves, then we shall search for stragglers and fulfil any other tasks given us. Are we all clear?'

'They'll be all over the mountain too,' said Solon. His voice was low and urgent, pitched just above the loud chirr of Sotha's insect chorus. 'They have to be here for the Pharos.'

'That's why we have to go there.' Oberdeii took a step forward. 'We know the mountain better than they do. If they want us, they'll have to fight their way across terrain they know nothing about to catch us. Our knowledge is an asset to ourselves and the greater Legion.'

'What if they want to destroy it?' asked Mallius quietly. 'We'll be better in the caves if they attack.'

Oberdeii looked up at the night sky. The streaks of fire coming from the orbital had ceased. 'They haven't yet.'

'You sound sure of yourself,' said Solon. 'This is nonsense. We should go underground. We'll last hours out here. The forest is no protection!'

'We are going up the mountain. We've done the majority of our training around the peak,' said Oberdeii calmly. 'Who is going to come off best in a tunnel fight – us, or a full brother in power armour?'

'I won't throw my life away because you're afraid of the dark!' snapped Solon.

The two of them locked eyes and stepped in close.

Tebecai put a hand on Solon's chest and pushed him back. 'The sergeant told us the same

thing,' he said. 'About ten minutes after he put Oberdeii in charge. Harry and withdraw, protect the civilians where possible. This is the best practical for those orders. You heard Oberdeii, brothers: we're going to the mountain.'

FIFTEEN

Ancient
Last stand
Shattered shield

Ancient Carakon pulled back his fist and slammed it into the command deck blast doors. The impact point flashed as the disruption field around his fist annihilated the metal of the door, shaking the corridor. Several craters already pocked the door's smooth surface. They would be through soon.

Kellenkir checked the mission mark. They were running behind schedule. Ultramarines held out in several other pockets. They were proving just as troublesome as he had expected, and more. The corpses of his Legion brothers were scattered the length of the long corridor, blasted apart by the weapons emplaced in the ceiling. These were smoking wrecks now, but they had done their damage. Skraivok's company, already undermanned, was down to less than half strength. They had come at their master's command, arriving by Dreadclaw and assault ram after the fall of the docking concourse. Six hundred had commenced the assault on the station, but fewer than four hundred remained.

At least Skraivok could be satisfied that his continued survival would vex Krukesh greatly.

Kellenkir did not care for the losses or the claw master's politicking. His mind was red with a gnawing angst no act could assuage. He was frustrated, he knew, but in his more dispassionate moments he could not decide why.

'Kellenkir,' said Skraivok. Kellenkir hated the sound of Skraivok's sneering voice through the vox. It was as bad as having the count in his helmet.

'My lord,' said Kellenkir sarcastically.

'Keep an eye on the rear,' said Skraivok.

'The rear?' said Kellenkir. 'There's nothing there! We've killed everything in this sector.' He looked back to where a number of legionaries and Legion servants were being riveted to the wall. Some of the humans were wailing. The Ultramarines glared grimly at their captors. 'Or we will have done soon.'

'Nevertheless, Kellenkir, I desire you to watch the rear,' said Skraivok without turning to look at the vexillary.

'Are you ordering me, captain?' said Kellenkir.

Carakon smashed another punch into the door. Sprays of lightning burst around his fist. He withdrew it with a grating crunch. The motors at his joints whined loudly as he pulled it back for another strike.

'Stop, Carakon,' said Skraivok. The Dreadnought complied. 'Are you challenging me in

front of my own First Claw, Kellenkir?'

'What do you think, Painted Count?'

Kellendvar came up behind his brother, a display of support and discouragement. 'Don't do this now,' he voxed privately.

'My brother thinks I should do as you say. I don't agree,' Kellenkir said.

'Carakon!'

'Yes, claw master?' The Dreadnought's voice rumbled from chest vox-speakers.

'If Kellenkir does not do as I order, kill him. Immediately.'

'As you wish, claw master.'

Carakon stepped around with difficulty. The Dreadnought could not stand up to its full height and came forward awkwardly, high shoulders scraping the ceiling down to raw metal. Carakon filled the corridor behind Skraivok.

'You have your dog well trained!' said Kellenkir. He looked to the others for support, but the warriors present were Skraivok's most loyal, and they stood, crowding his back, staring back at him in silent hostility. They were all fools. 'Very well. I shall obey.' He saluted insolently. 'My lord.'

Kellenkir pushed his way out of the press of killers and made his way to the end of the corridor. Kellendvar went with him. Skraivok nodded at the door, and Carakon resumed his work.

'Why do you provoke him?' said Kellendvar.

'Why not? Life is dull, he riles easily.'

Kellendvar grabbed the rim of his brother's pauldron, damaging the human skin pinned over it. 'He will kill you!'

Kellenkir grasped his brother's hand. 'I do not care,' he said, wrenching it free.

They passed down between the crucified prisoners. Their clothes and armour had been torn from them. All mark of rank and degree stripped away, the humans looked alike, while the Space Marines looked like over-muscled parodies of the human form. Their screams had quietened now all were nailed in place. They awaited their fate according to their character, the Space Marines in silent fury, the humans as stoically as they could manage. Some were resigned, others proud. Two were openly weeping in fear, many moaned and writhed at the pain of the spikes in their wrists and feet.

'They care about their deaths,' said Kellenkir. 'They do not have the freedom I have found. They are in terror of what we are about to do to them, and so they should be, for the agonies of the flesh will be upon them soon. Pain is unpleasant, but it is fleeting. I am a master of my art, and I can keep a man alive in pain for only a few days. When the blackness of death takes them, then they shall be glad. That is the lesson all must learn. You will learn it, brother, and so shall Skraivok.'

A muttering distracted him. He paused by a man whose lips danced over quiet words, his eyes closed. Fascinated, Kellenkir leaned in close, and the words tumbled out at greater speed at the Night Lord's proximity. Kellenkir stood back and sneered. The man was praying.

'See, brother, even here in the perfect kingdom,' he said. 'Hear the whimpering that reveals the truth of the lie. Even here, they secretly worship the False Emperor as a god. They are trying so very hard not to be frightened.'

Kellenkir spat at the man, and acid hissed on his bare flesh. He grimaced but continued to pray.

'Your Emperor cannot save you. He does not care,' Kellenkir whispered close to his face. 'He is a liar!'

'Leave him,' said an Ultramarine pinned up next to the man. His face was bloody, and a wide wound marred his stomach.

'Or what? How can you possibly enact your threat? Threat is your implication, is it not?' said Kellenkir. 'Surely you should be applauding my challenge of this weakling's delusion. He prays to the Emperor! That is wrong, even you can see that.'

'He is in the hands of monsters,' said the Ultramarine. 'It is no surprise he prays.'

'Aye, he is. And your turn will come, son of Guilliman.'

'Your turn is not so far behind!' snarled the Ultramarine. 'My brothers will come to you and they shall destroy you. That is the only f–'

Kellendvar's axe flashed down onto the Ultramarine. The blade was sharp, but his head was obliterated by its power field rather than cleanly cut. A fine mist of atomised flesh settled over the two Night Lords. The Ultramarine's lifeless body drooped forward, tugging at the curved bars that pinned him.

A deeper silence fell on the prisoners. A burst of laughter erupted from Kellenkir. 'See, brother? They learn their lesson already. If only I had the time to teach you myself, but I have been given another task.' He pointed with his chainglaive to the junction. There four Night Lords were unsheathing broad-bladed skinning knives, thin flensing blades and tendon hooks.

Kellenkir and Kellendvar passed them and went to the junction. The melodies of battle rattled away in the depths of the station, increasingly isolated. Alarms sounded in a distant sector, but there on the main promenade around the command hub it was eerily quiet. The booming of Carakon's fist against the door broke the silence into discrete sections, hushed as the spaces in a dying heartbeat.

The Night Lords torturers set to work, and the screaming began in earnest, a horrendous bubbling cry of utmost agony. The Ultramarines tugged at their bonds and shouted impotently at their captors.

A surge of ugly delight pushed up out of Kellenkir's soul, and he slammed his chainglaive into the decking in salute of it.

‘Now they are afraid,’ he said to his brother.

The Night Lords had accessed the internal systems. The lights were dying. The air recycling systems cut out. The human members of the command deck crew started to shiver as the station radiated heat slowly into space.

The head of the orbital’s support systems went from station to station, angrily toggling dead switches. ‘It’s no use, my lord. We’re cut off.’

‘I cannot raise anyone on the Legion vox-network,’ said Genus. ‘We have been comprehensively jammed.’

Adallus watched the door. The thin impressions of claw tracks distorted it from the other side. ‘They’re doing this to torment us, a cruel and unnecessary practical typical to their murderous breed. They will be through soon, and we shall demonstrate how a warrior should behave. Everyone, to your positions.’

Humans jammed their hands under their armpits for warmth and went to their designated points of defence. Silently, the Ultramarines dispersed themselves around the octagonal deck, taking up station to maximise their firepower. The Night Lords would not be allowed to triumph without bloodshed.

A dozen Space Marines waited at the opposite side of the room to the door. A handful were stationed on the gallery floor that circled the room alongside the ship’s human crew. There were fifty mortals, of whom ten were front-line troopers armed with high-powered lasguns and clad in form-fitting armour, but the rest were deck officers and carried nothing more than small-arms.

The other eight Space Marines, along with Captain Adallus, Odillio and Genus, waited on the ground floor, bolters ready and close-combat weapons maglocked to their chests and thighs. Between the defenders and the door was a no-man’s-land of fizzing pict screens and dead operations stations.

No one spoke as they waited. The humans fidgeted to fight off the cold, their breath freezing on metal or falling from the air in showers of tiny ice crystals. The Space Marines were statues, their limbs bereft of the tics and twitches of normal men and women standing still. The armoured door vibrated in its frame.

The deck’s vox-system activated. Floating vox-horns and mouthpieces bumped into one another. More screaming came from them, a chilling orchestra which performed at the command of cruel conductors. At first Adallus and his men assumed it to be on a loop, but then the holo displays shuddered back into activity. The Space Marines reacted as one, training their weapons upon the image.

The display showed the corridor and the prisoners pinned to the walls. It showed what the Night Lords were doing to them. Some of the humans turned away. One noisily vomited. From this festival of barbarity the screaming came. The Space Marines let their weapons up, but could not tear their eyes away as the skin was ripped from a shrieking man’s chest.

‘Lord Guilliman should have put these scum down a long time ago,’ said Adallus. ‘Do

not look at it. It is what they want. They wish to weaken our resolve, but we will not allow it to be weakened.' He levelled his gun at the door. 'None of us will live this day out. Let us ensure the enemy too do not see the dawning of another day. They call themselves the lords of the night, we shall cast them into it.'

The metallic clicks of bolters being resettled against armour seemed a poor defiance against the deafening screams. All of them, human and transhuman, prepared themselves to die.

The doors burst inward, the torn petals of the metal smoking with atomic dissolution. A Dreadnought helm fashioned into an imperious skull thrust through the gap, roaring metallic Nostraman war-cries from its vox-grilles. In the shadows it appeared a monster.

It *was* a monster, Adallus told himself, of the worst possible kind. Many cultures had cautionary tales of fallen angels, and no wonder.

The Dreadnought withdrew. Grenades arced through the ragged hole, clatter-bumped across the deck and exploded. They did no damage, but forced the Space Marines nearby to duck back, allowing a pair of melta bombs to be hastily applied to the breach. The door were thick, proof against most things. Ceramite facings covered both sides, but the Dreadnought had burrowed through like a monstrous beetle, exposing the vulnerable plasteel within.

'Servants of Ultramar! Cover your eyes!' shouted Adallus. His own visor plate darkened as the fusion devices activated, burning themselves up with the ferocity of dying stars. They melted their way downwards through the metal and spilled out gluey tracks of red-hot sludge. The temperature in the room climbed briefly again.

The Dreadnought burst in, kicking the ruins of the door aside with massive feet. It could not stand in the corridor, but the command deck was higher, and as it came through the gap it rose up to its full height. The skull was painted a shocking white, a death idol from a backwater world. Night-blue formed the bulk of its livery, but many of its larger panels incorporated pict-projectors. These displayed the most horrendous images imaginable, violent atrocities that would test the stomach of the most depraved warlord. There were so many, an endless parade of suffering. Trapped in the armour plates, the tortured, howling faces of the Night Lords' victims seemed condemned to a two-dimensional hell, able to see the universe beyond, but unable to escape their pain into it.

Adallus tore his eyes from the picts as the Dreadnought rushed through the gap. Upon its chest was a plain scroll, incongruously chaste upon the flickering torture show its projectors played. A name was graven into it, in the traditional manner.

Carakon.

This dissonance, a reminder of the machine's noble origins and the terrible thing it had become, distracted Adallus dangerously.

His men opened fire en masse. Muzzle flash striped the room. Bolt-rounds exploded harmlessly on the Dreadnought's plasteel hide. In two strides the Contemptor was across the command deck, kicking operations stations to pieces as it charged, howling wildly.

Odillio led three men at its side as it barrelled towards the captain. They had melta bombs at the ready, turning the flask keys to activate the fusion overload.

Before they could slap them upon the machine's legs, the Dreadnought's torso spun around on its waist gimbal, arm out. One brother was smashed from his feet and lofted into a wall, his melta bomb detonating in his hands. A second found death waiting in the Contemptor's claws. The machine drove its long steel fingers through the Space Marine's chest and flicked the body aside before Carakon grabbed the third and squeezed hard, breaking his armour with a deafening crack. Blood and gore sluiced from the broken battleplate. Even as this last warrior died, Carakon was bringing up his other arm and gunning down a fourth. The ancient shook the crushed remains free, and turned upon Odillio.

Odillio was on the floor, knocked down by the Dreadnought's lightning response. Carakon lifted his foot. Overstressed muscle bundles and motivators buzzed loudly as it stamped down on the Ultramarine, crushing his head and shoulder flat. A blast from a melta gun slagged its right shoulder guard, but again Carakon turned. Roaring out his anger at this grievous hurt, he sprayed a wide arc of the command deck with bolter fire until his gun clicked empty. His assailant dived aside, but the Dreadnought's shots went everywhere, punching through the armoured barriers of the gallery mezzanine and cutting down half a dozen human officers.

The Night Lords came behind him. Gunfire from mankind's most deadly technologies blazed back and forth across the room. The Ultramarines were quick with their shots, switching from target to target as soon as each was incapacitated. The Night Lords were less disciplined, pouring in with an unseemly eagerness. A number were blasted off their feet in a hail of mass-reactives. One was vaporised by a plasma blast, many more wounded.

The Dreadnought turned its attention to the fire coming down on it and its brothers from the gallery. A ferocious short-ranged exchange of fire criss-crossed the narrow gap. Bolt-rounds hammered into its face, shattering its primary visual lenses and stripping paint from the skull. The Dreadnought lashed out, sweeping its arms side to side.

Adallus was out from his hiding place, moving away from the Dreadnought's stamping legs. Two Night Lords rushed through the doors, fighting as one – one armed with a massive power axe, the other wielding a chainglaive. The first was methodical, only striking when sure of a kill. The second was a maniac, helmetless, spinning a long Nostraman glaive over his head with little care for his comrades. Despite the glaive-wielder's abandon, the fighting styles of the two meshed, the wildness of one supporting the restraint of the other.

The firefight slackened as close melee was joined. Adallus' men killed more than their enemy, but the Night Lords were numerous.

Adallus threw down his bolter and plucked his power sword from his leg. The Dreadnought roared behind him, staggering as it was caught by another melta blast in the knee. Adallus ignored it, thumbing the activation stud of the sword. The energy field

sparked into life. The two warriors saw him, pointing through the smoke and reek of battle. Adallus' centurion's crest made him an obvious target.

He saluted the pair as they came at him. The warrior with the axe inclined his head. There was no such indication of mutual respect from the glaive-wielder.

Buzzing teeth sawed through the air. The warrior gripped the haft of his glaive near the head and at the centre, swinging in sharply then jabbing at the captain. Adallus moved away from the feint. The axeman came in quickly in the footsteps of his brother, his axe already descending. No doubt he sought to capitalise on his comrade's distraction of their foe, but Adallus did not take the bait. Sword met axe-head, blade to blade. There was a blinding, actinic flash and a bang so loud that his aural dampers engaged. Adallus stepped back under cover of the explosion, sweeping his sword around to catch the blow he knew would be coming from the glaive. Teeth sheared off the chain track as they encounted his power sword's destructive bite, and the bearer cursed in ugly Nostraman. The glaive-wielder's battle stance became more considered, and he backed away, weighing his opponent more carefully.

Night Lords gained the gallery. Fierce fighting broke out there as the final few Ultramarines sold their lives as dearly as they could. Their hatred for the traitors outdid the grim enjoyment the Night Lords felt at the battle, and for a moment they cast the invaders back. A final victory that could not last.

Many of the human crew opted to shoot themselves rather than be taken alive. The last Ultramarines were smashed down and speared by saw-toothed weapons, or flanked and shot down. Blood slicked everything. The previously frigid room was hot with the fighting, clamorous with the racket of potent weaponries, suffocating with fyceline smoke.

Adallus fought on. He had drawn his bolt pistol. Night Lords gathered in a circle around them, those that were not dragging screaming captives out of the room. One raised his boltgun to shoot Adallus in the back. Adallus saw this, but could do nothing to counter as he was occupied with the mismatched warrior pair. He awaited the final shot as he fought off his paired foes, but a warrior in the ornate armour of a claw master shook his head, tapped his own weapon, and the warrior lowered his bolter.

Adallus was to be permitted to die with honour, at least.

The two came at him again and again. His bolt pistol shots went wide. The few that impacted did not bring either down, but drove one or the other back, until there were no rounds left in its magazine and he tossed the weapon away.

He went for the glaive-wielder. Adallus was renowned for his speed, and he had a fine control of his blade that had often bested his brothers. Never had it been employed in such earnest before.

The glaive-wielder wavered, and Adallus switched attack, bringing the weapon around to batter back the axeman. The axeman caught the blow with a tight flick of his axe-head, giving Adallus enough time to step between them, too close for their larger weapons to be used effectively. He elbowed the axeman hard in the gorget, sending him backward, and

drove his sword point at the other's chest.

The blade never hit. A white sheet of light obscured the warrior, and then Adallus saw that his hand had gone. The mangled remains of his sword hit the floor.

Their leader put up a smoking volkite serpenta.

'Bravo,' said the captain, 'but we must hurry things along. It was getting boring, and I have a schedule to keep.' He had a supercilious manner that made Adallus loathe him. 'Kellenkir, Kellendvar – finish him.'

The glaive-wielder swung the shaft of his weapon around, catching Adallus above the ankles and slamming him to the floor. 'I will take him.'

The axeman stared down at him, axe held across his stomach. 'He deserves a clean death, he fought well.'

The warriors looked at their leader expectantly.

The claw master shook his head. 'Not this one. He had his chance. Kellenkir, do with him as you will, but remember you owe me twice. Once for your life, once for his death.'

The glaive-wielder, Kellenkir, bowed hesitantly at the claw master.

'Contact Lord Krukesh, tell him the station is mine–' The claw master frowned, and corrected himself. 'His.'

He looked around at the devastation.

'Too many losses. If this continues, Krukesh will have his desire and I will be dead. What are you waiting for? Take that one away!' he snapped imperiously. 'His defiance cost us too much.'

Kellenkir leaned down and slapped something onto Adallus' battleplate. It discharged a massive burst of energy into his armour. Supplementary muscles jerked, his helm display flickered out. The thrum of his power pack whined away to silence. His battleplate was dead.

'Now is the time for you to witness my other skills, Ultramarine,' said the glaive-wielder. He motioned for two others to drag the captain up.

In the end, Adallus' death was neither quick nor heroic.

SIXTEEN

A city sacked
Horror squared
Unexpected rescue

From the shelter of an abandoned farm, the Sothan First watched their city burn.

Gunfire crackled around Sothopolis, the awful banging of bolters unmistakable even so far away. Cannon fire strobed the legionary castellum. Fires had taken in the city's centre and were sweeping through the agricolum fields around it. Crescents of flame, fanned by the sea wind, tore rapidly through the dry crops.

'They're burning everything,' said Bolarion. 'Why would they do such a thing?'

Vitellius stared through his field glasses at Sothopolis. 'This isn't conquest. This is destruction.'

'I've heard the traitors want to kill, not secure compliance. What if it's the World Eaters?' said Govenisk shakily. 'They slaughter everyone they come across, for sport.'

'They're not even the worst of them,' muttered Bolarion.

'What's the plan, lieutenant?' asked Mericus. 'We can't all go down. We'd be spotted.'

The officers watched from the main house of the farm, a long, single-storey building with an attached barn for livestock. It had taken a long time to persuade the Sothans to live in the new city, and the farm had been abandoned perhaps five years back.

Sotha had taken the land back greedily. Most of the pasture was already swamped by quicktree growth. Stands of the vegetation swayed in outbuildings reduced to roofless squares. Others grew from piles of rubble, their roots bursting the walls and bringing the buildings down. But the house still stood, the roof of split shale in place, precious glass in the windows. The perimeter wall was also mostly sound. The farm occupied a broad shelf low down on the mountainside. A tall cliff bounded the back, the mouth of one of the Pharos' caves gaping in it. More cliffs fronted the slope. A trail led up from Sothopolis to the plateau, coming up the cliffs via steps cut into the rock. The cliff to the fore was high enough to give them a good view over the city, the edge overgrown enough to keep them hidden. It was, all told, a fine natural defensive position, and the platoon were dispersed around it, silently waiting.

'We should have stayed on the mountain. Dwelling in a town makes us vulnerable,' said Govenisk. 'I've always said it.'

'Power, water, hot showers. Plenty of food. People who complain about that are deluded by nostalgia,' said Bolarion.

'Yeah? Well, when this is over, I'm coming back to live up here,' said Govenisk.

A mushroom cloud of flame burst upwards from the city generatorium, the boom of its

detonation rolling from cliff to cliff and onwards over the forests. Wildlife screeched in agitation, then settled back to an unsettled nocturnal drone.

'There won't be a city left,' said Vitellius. 'We might have no choice.'

'Are we just going to sit here and watch?' said Bolarion.

'Lasguns aren't going to stop legionaries,' said Govenisk. 'What else can we do? We should wait here.' He looked nervously out of the window. 'Yeah, that's what we should do.'

'You'd think they'd have given us better weapons,' said Bolarion. 'In case this happened. Only, it wasn't supposed to.'

'That's got nothing to do with it. They give us the weapons we have for exactly the reason that they *are* useless against battleplate,' said Govenisk angrily. 'We little people were always the weak link in the Emperor's vision, weren't we? Quarrelsome as children, always more likely to turn on our saviours. Not like the Legiones Astartes, conquering sons of the Emperor. They were loyal! They were strong! The galaxy is saved!' he said with mocking pomposity. 'I never believed it. I knew no man can be right all the time.'

'You almost seem happy about it,' said Mericus.

'It's always uplifting when your worldview is confirmed, especially if it's a miserable one,' said Bolarion. 'Nothing is more satisfied than a cynic proved right. Saying "I told you there were phantines in this thicket" while they're being trampled to death is a fine, bitter wine for them.'

'Cynic or not, he's not been proven right, not yet,' said Mericus. 'We're not helpless. We have them.' Mericus nodded his head at the platoon's three heavy bolters. 'A lasgun isn't going to scratch legionary battleplate, but *they* will.'

Vitellius bit his bottom lip thoughtfully. 'We'll use this as a temporary base of operations. Bolarion, you're in charge. Get the heavies set up, give me a good intersecting field of fire down the trail. You know what you're doing. Mericus, Govenisk and I will head downwards, direct any civilians we come across there back up here. I'll leave you the gunners, and a demi-squad. We'll put three more men down at the foot of the steps as sentries. Make sure you post lookouts in good positions.'

'I should be coming with you,' said Bolarion. 'My family's down there.'

'That's exactly why you're not. I don't want anyone taking risks that might hurt us all.'

'But–'

'No risks,' repeated Vitellius. 'Any civilians we send your way, take them into the mountain.'

'Some of the older ones won't like that. They're afraid of the mountain ghosts.'

'It's better than the alternative,' said Vitellius. 'Are we all clear?'

'Yes, lieutenant,' said Mericus.

‘Aye,’ said Bolarion. ‘If you say so, lieutenant.’

Govenisk blinked eyes bloodshot and wide.

‘Very well. Gather your men. We leave in five minutes.’

Mericus, Vitellius and Govenisk led a group of twenty-two down the cliff-cut steps in silence. The men ducked into the trees every time a gunship roared overhead. One circled not far from their position, shredding the forest with its armament before flying off to some other target. The platoon hid, until Vitellius was certain it had passed on for good.

The descent from the mountain took an age of sweating palms and frayed nerves, and yet it was too soon they were down the last scarps and onto the agricolum on the plain. They crept from the forest fringes into dark fields, and passed by a heavy plant depot whose tractors and agri-walkers they mistook for lurking legionaries more than once.

Deep in a field of maize, Vitellius called the men together, and split the platoon further. Mericus’ squad, supplemented by four of Bolarion’s, he sent towards the city. Vitellius took the nervy Govenisk with him towards the shore and the road there to intercept any refugees fleeing along the coast. Mericus didn’t ask to go towards town, but Vitellius looked a silent request that he go with the braver men, and he accepted without blinking.

The sounds of fighting were frighteningly close now. The men crouched in total silence while Vitellius divided them up, and then sent them on their way.

Not long afterwards, Mericus came upon the first of the civilians. Fifty men, women and children stumbling through the dark. He knew all of them, naturally. Sotha’s colony was tiny. Many were in a state of shock too profound to leave them alone, so he detailed Martinus and Aelius to guide them. ‘Get them safe, and don’t come back,’ he said. The two men were happy to oblige, having found family in the refugee band, although they took their leave of the others with guilty glances.

They came across two more groups in quick succession. All had evacuated at the first sound of the sirens and had seen none of the enemy. Mericus had not anticipated meeting so many people so soon, and assigned single men from Bolarion’s command to the second and third groups, with the same orders not to return.

Each successive group was more battered and fearful than the last. A while passed until the fourth, and they were the worst. These had encountered the enemy. They were blackened by smoke, their nostrils and eyes pale smears in the soot. Many were covered in blood; not their own. There were no wounded. Boltguns rarely left a normal man alive.

He saw Bolarion’s wife, her face blank with horror. She gripped the hand of her son so tightly that her knuckles were white.

‘Andradea?’

She turned to him without recognition.

‘It’s me, Mericus Giraldus.’

‘Mericus?’

‘Yes. Mericus.’

She looked over his shoulder. Her pretty face was slack with horror, giving her an idiot’s expression. Mericus took her shoulders gently and turned her back to him.

‘Bolarion… Kolom is safe.’

She blinked and stared past Mericus as if looking at something she couldn’t believe she was seeing. So intense was the expression that Mericus found himself glancing over his shoulder.

‘Did you hear me? Your husband is fine. Andradea?’

‘I got Pratus away,’ she mumbled. ‘They’re killing indiscriminately. They set fire to the medicae with the… with the people still inside.’

‘How many are there?’ asked Mericus softly.

‘They shot down the alderman, just like that. It was horrible.’

‘How many are there, Andradea?’ he repeated.

‘Hundreds? Thousands? Space Marines in dark armour, and lightning, some with faces playing on the armour like picts. There were so many. They had skin hanging from their shoulders… the faces of… the faces of *men*, peeled from their flesh, and bones… The bones…’ Her voice dropped into a mumble, and she shook her head repetitively.

‘Mama!’ said Bolarion’s son, clearly terrified. She blinked at him and squeezed his hand, and seemed to come back into herself a little.

She shuddered. ‘How can they act like that? They’re Legiones Astartes. I don’t understand.’

One of Mericus’ men whistled sharply. The fire had taken hold on the crops not far away and a wall of flames was moving obliquely towards them. The night was orange with the burning, brightest over the town. The baleful sky seemed invigorated by it, and shone more redly than ever.

‘They’ve always been this way,’ said Mericus, turning back to Andradea. ‘They took back the whole galaxy in two hundred years. How do you think they managed that? We’re seeing them now how they really are.’ He realised then that he sounded like Govenisk.

‘Our lords are not like that.’

Mericus smiled reassuringly. ‘No, they aren’t,’ he said, but he was not so sure. The Ultramarines had conquered thousands of worlds. A good many had been human cultures. Were the sons of Ultramar any less ruthless when ordered to lay their mercy aside? How many men and women had the legionaries he knew slaughtered because their leaders had dared to turn the offer of Imperium down? Whole civilisations had been purged. They’d heard it all from the newscriers. The remembrancers of the Ultramarines had been diligent in their reporting.

It all seemed so blindingly obvious now, that weapons with minds can turn against their

masters.

‘Go, Andradea. Get up the mountain, all of you. Follow Klavius and Demethon here, they’ll take you somewhere safe. And go quietly!’

‘What about you?’ said Andradea. Klavius shouldered his gun and gently led her away. ‘Mericus!’ she cried, and was gone.

‘Yeah, what about you?’ said Tiny Jonno.

‘What about us, you mean,’ said Mericus. ‘We’re going in to have a closer look.’

‘What?’

‘Will everyone *please* stop saying “what” to me?’ He gathered around his men as the refugees stumbled on towards the mountain. ‘I can’t make you do this. I refuse to order you. Come with me or don’t, the choice has to be with you, and let no man judge you poorly. But if we can get an idea of what exactly we’re up against, we’ll all stand a better chance.’

His squad looked at him in silence, reflected flames dancing in their eyes.

‘Don’t all speak at once,’ said Mericus. ‘Either that means you’re all coming with me, in which case I’m touched by your display of solidarity, or you’re waiting until someone else is brave enough to tell me where I can go.’

‘Mericus!’ said Tiny disbelievingly. ‘Course we’re coming with you!’

The others looked at each other shiftily. ‘Great. Thanks, Tiny,’ said Hasquin. ‘I was going to run, but if Tiny’s going I can’t do that. I’ll never live it down.’

‘That decides it then,’ said Morio. ‘We’re all in.’

‘I’m not,’ said Pontian firmly. ‘I’m no coward. I’ll fight, but I’m not committing suicide. I heard Bolarion’s wife.’

‘Fine,’ said Mericus. ‘Go with Klavius and Demethon. No one will think the worse of you.’

‘I will,’ muttered Hasquin.

Demethon spoke up from where he was organising the people of Sothopolis. ‘If it’s good with you, sergeant, I’ll trade places with Pontian. You’re only sending us back because we’re not in your squad. I don’t see why that should be. I’ll go.’

The remainder of Mericus’ squad slapped Demethon on the back as he joined them. They were no less generous in bidding Pontian farewell.

That left Mericus with a demisquad.

‘Then we go quietly, and we go quickly. No shooting. You draw a bead on a Space Marine and act on it, you’ll only annoy him and tell all his friends where we are. Recon only, you got that?’

‘You know sarge, quite a few people say you’re crazy,’ said Tiny.

‘Quite of few of them are right,’ said Mericus. ‘Come on.’

Closer in to the city they passed the first of the drop pods. A tall craft, its petal doors blown out, the shape of it reminded Mericus of the large nuts they grew on the beachside plantations. The soil of the plain was soft. The pod’s weight had forced it into the ground, and it leaned off-centre. Burnt grass ringed it. They passed by too far away to see any Legion insignia on its surface, but Mericus was taking no chances; the whir of motors told him its sentinel gun was still active, so they passed it on the side tipped up towards the sky.

‘Who do you think it is?’ said Hasquin. ‘Sounded like Night Lords to me, from what Andradea said. Heard some bad things about them. Skin you as soon as look at you. Terror troops. No wonder they went bad.’

‘How much of that stuff is true?’ said Morio.

‘Enough is,’ grumbled Hasquin.

‘Shh!’ said Mericus. He dropped low, gesturing his men to do the same. Another drop pod was ahead. It had come down on its side. The squad fanned out and approached.

‘This one was hit,’ said Mericus.

‘Let’s go then!’ said Tiny, jogging ahead.

‘Tiny!’ hissed Mericus. He cursed him for a fool and followed after him.

Large holes had been blasted through the pod’s armoured doors. Half the thruster units were missing. The pod had come down hard and the part pressed into the mud was ruptured, the metal wrinkled as easily as cloth by the impact. Fires guttered in places, burning blue in a pool of spilled fuel. The crash site smelled of petrochem fumes and blood. Most of doors had been forced half-open. Dead legionaries hung in their restraints inside. One door on the far side had blown its explosive bolts. Mericus took a deep breath, pulled his lasgun tight into his cheek and poked his head into the craft. Some of the harnesses were empty. He risked his flashlight, and shone it over the dead. All of them were horribly wounded, large wet craters in their armour.

He lingered on those least damaged. They were Space Marines unlike any he had seen. He’d heard the stories about the VIII Legion too, but nothing prepared him for the vile fetishes adorning their armour…

He snapped the light off and pulled back. He was light-headed from more than just the fumes, and gulped for air.

‘Any alive?’ asked Demethon.

‘Long gone.’ Mericus pointed to boot tracks, deep in the Sothan earth. ‘The rest are dead.’

‘The fall must have killed them.’

‘I don’t think a fall even like this could kill legionaries,’ he said. ‘They’ve all got wounds.’ He glanced to the sky. There was a brightness coming into it, turning the

Ruinstorm pink on the horizon. ‘Damn it! The fire’s masked the dawn. We’ve not got long. A couple of hours.’

‘We should take their boltguns,’ said Hasquin. ‘That’ll level the odds.’

‘Don’t be stupid, it’d take two of us just to lift one,’ said Demethon.

‘Don’t call me stupid,’ said Hasquin.

Jonno scurried out of the dark unexpectedly, making the others jump. ‘Sarge, come quick. There’s more of them.’

The rest of the squad lay in a ditch by a hedge of quicktrees and thornbush. On the other side was a huge field, the crops whipping in warm breezes coming off the fires. Tractor trails cut deep tramlines through the crops.

‘There,’ said Jonno. ‘About a dozen.’

Three thunderous booms sounded from the castellum. They were close to the Space Marine fortress, although they could not see it from their position.

‘Twelve drop pods,’ said Mericus flatly. ‘And all intact.’

‘Can you see any legionaries?’ asked Demethon.

‘Does it matter?’ said Hasquin. ‘There’s only going to be more as we go further in. We might as well toss ourselves into a phantine mating rumpus. Our chances of survival would be just about as good.’

‘What now, sarge?’ asked Tiny Jonno. ‘How are we going to get through that?’

Morio pulled a face. ‘Can you see that look? That’s Mericus’ “I’ve got an idea, but you’re not going to like it,” look.’

‘The cloaca,’ said Mericus. ‘These ditches link up nearby, and go into an infall. We can get right into the city that way.’

The men groaned.

‘I told you you wouldn’t like it,’ said Morio.

Every civic infrastructure in the Five Hundred Worlds of Ultramar was planned meticulously, from the largest to the very smallest. As carefully designed as they were above ground, so it was below. When the Sothopolis was founded, the sewer network had gone down before anything else. The scale of it was far in excess of Sothopolis’ current needs. Guilliman’s foresight and confidence amazed Mericus. The world was off-limits, the galaxy was being torn apart by war, but still he looked to the future, envisaging a Sotha that Mericus wouldn’t see if he lived to be a thousand years old.

The men dropped down into the ferrocrete ditches, keeping their heads down and crawling through the muck at the bottom when they had to. Mericus looked often to the lightening sky. They ought to turn back to the safety of the mountain, but Mericus had to see, he had to know what was happening to his adopted home.

The battle around the castellum reached a crescendo as they entered the cool mouth to

Sotha's drainage system. The discharge of heavy weapons banged sharply, barely muted by the drain. Bare grey walls hemmed the Sothans in, bringing with them a sense of security that was entirely false. If they were found down there they were as good as dead.

A thin stream of water ran in the angle of the floor. Other channels joined the tunnel, and the stream grew until it swirled around their ankles. After a time, the agricultural ditches gave out, and plastek pipes covered with hinged flaps protruded into the tunnel – the first of the domestic outflows of Sothopolis.

They came to the end of the tunnel and were into the main sewer of the city, the Cloaca Maxima. A walkway ran alongside a deep canal of waste water. From up the tunnel came the churning sound of the treatment plant. If Mericus strained his ears, he could hear the faraway pounding of surf.

They went on, guns up, eyes darting into every shadow. The closer they came to the centre, the quieter it became. Isolated bursts of gunfire rattled down from storm drains. A scream had them all freeze, but it was over as soon as it came, cut off with horrible suddenness.

Sothopolis' compact size had them under the main square in no time, and from the noise filtering from above, there was a lot of activity there.

'Sounds like construction work,' hissed Morio. 'I hear hammers. Power tools.'

'That and… and moaning?' said Hanspire.

Mericus' mouth was suddenly dry. He licked his lips to moisten them. The need to know still had him in its clutches, but part of him quailed at the thought of what he might see. He looked up to a band of early dawn light creeping in through a storm drain tube. He went and stood underneath and looked upward.

He weighed his need to know against his desire not to.

'Hasquin, boost me up,' he said eventually.

Standing awkwardly on his trooper's shoulders, Mericus went up into the storm drain, and carefully looked through the slit there.

'What can you see?' Hasquin hissed.

'Nothing. There is something in the way. Be quiet.'

Centimetres from the end of his nose were a pair of dark blue greaves cladding transhuman legs. They moved away, allowing him a view right into the middle of the square. What was revealed revolted him.

'Konor's bones,' he breathed.

'What? What?' said Hasquin.

The world seemed to throb queasily in front of him. In a detached way, Mericus realised he had never felt horror, not truly. Not until that moment. There were so many words so easily used. To be confronted with their true meaning upended reality.

That's what they want, thought Mericus, fighting down his panic. *They want you to be afraid. Keep it together.* He struggled to in the face of what he saw in the square.

Mericus' eyes flicked from horror to horror. Very quickly he had had his fill. 'Let me down,' he whispered.

'What did you see?' Hasquin said.

'You don't want to know. We should never have come.'

'The moaning…' said Morio. 'What are they doing to them?'

'We can't help them. We have to go,' said Mericus.

The others were spooked. They all began to whisper at once. He managed to get them into some form of order just as cruel laughter and voices echoed up the cloaca, and they fell into terrified silence again.

The Night Lords were coming.

Quick as vermin, the Sothans hid themselves away in the branching tunnels of the sewers.

Three Space Marines came past. Two were invaders, huge and threatening in their battleplate. The third had been stripped of his armour. His hands were bound, and he moved oddly. The Night Lords prodded him with sparking goads, and laughed at his involuntary spasms and grunts.

The Night Lords went past without noticing them. They were thirty metres away before Mericus dared speak.

'We can't just leave him.'

'Right,' said Hasquin. 'What are we going to do? There's two of them and only six of us!'

'We can't help our people, but we can help him. I'm going out.'

'You're insane! They'll just shoot you!'

'No they won't,' said Mericus. They'll want more sport from me than that. Their sadism is their weakness.'

'They'll just blow us all away,' hissed Hasquin.

'I'm thinking on the fly here!' Mericus hoped if it came down to it he did get shot, not end up in the square. At least it would be quick. 'Demethon, Morio, Jonno, Hanspire, over the other side, quietly! Jonno!'

'Yes, sarge?'

'Do your stuff.'

Tiny's ratty face set with determination.

The four men slid into dirty water up to their necks and went to the other side of the

canal. There a tunnel with no walkway entered the Cloaca Maxima, and they concealed themselves inside. The legionaries were too occupied with their prisoner to notice. *Sadistic and over-confident*, thought Mericus. *That doubles our chances*.

'I'm going to draw their attention. Be ready,' said Mericus.

Hasquin touched a krak grenade at his belt. Mericus nodded, closed his eyes, and stepped onto the walkway.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'Over here!'

He opened fire, stepping back down the tunnel with every shot. He kept his gun up to his shoulder and made sure he hit, stilling the shaking of his arms with purpose. Sharp lasbeams cracked the air, scoring the metal of the rearmost warrior's armour. The Night Lord turned around, to get a shot in the face. Instinctively the Space Marine threw up his hands to protect his vulnerable eye-lenses.

Relatively vulnerable, some phlegmatic part of Mericus reminded him.

The Night Lord charged.

Mericus had never been so terrified in his life. He had never felt completely at ease around the transhuman warriors of Ultramar. Nobody did. But to face a Space Marine coming at him in anger was an entirely different experience to awkwardly sharing a drink with one.

He had become used to how big they were. Too used to it. The warrior coming at him was too huge to be called a man. His was the human form pushed to the limits of recognisability. The armour made him into something that, in earlier eras, would have had him classified as an armoured vehicle. Ceramite boots stamped flinders from the ferrocrete as he came down the walkway. He swung a polearm longer than Mericus was tall. The chainblade at the head of it was blocky as an ammo crate, the teeth spinning there as large as dinner knives. The whole effect was one of massive, almost ridiculous overscaling.

This was a man distorted beyond the capacity of a normal mind to absorb. He was more than an ogre. More than the wildest story. There was simply too much of the Space Marine to appear real.

Everything about him was intended to inflict maximum damage to beings and machines far greater than a mere man. He was heavy, strong, fearless, unbelievably fast and utterly deadly.

And he was coming for Mericus.

If the fact of this war-giant's existence were not enough, he had gone to lengths to make himself even more terrifying. The breathing mask of his helm had been refashioned into the shape of a skeletal mouth, with long, monster's teeth. The image was carried on around the eyes and forehead in paint, so that a twisted death's head glowered at Mericus. Skulls that were tiny by comparison to the Space Marine's massive helmet bounced on cords attached to his pauldrons. Only when he was within ten metres did Mericus realise that they were the bleached bones of full-grown men.

Somehow he managed to compartmentalise his terror and kept on firing until the Space Marine was on top of him.

Hasquin lived up to his promise. As the giant passed the junction, Hasquin's krak grenade rolled out onto the walkway. It rattled between the feet of the Night Lord and exploded. Mericus flung himself into the sewage channel as fire billowed up the tunnel. The Space Marine was flung sideways by the blast, one foot coming off and splashing into the water some way from its owner. The stricken Night Lord flailed at the surface and sank from view.

The rest of Mericus' men opened fire. Three lasguns burned the paint off the armour of the other traitor. He dropped to one knee unconcernedly, drawing his bolt pistol. Hanspire exploded, his torso reduced to red mist and flying fragments of bone. Another round tore through Morio's shoulder, spanking off a wall further down the tunnel without detonating.

Through all this Jonno knelt motionlessly, his rifle sight to his eye. Mericus felt guilty for teasing the little man. What Jonno lacked in stature and brains, he more than made up for in courage.

The Night Lord levelled his gun at him, but Jonno got there first. He fired a single shot. A wisp of smoke curled from the Night Lord's shattered helm lens and he toppled dead into the water.

It all felt wrong, killing the Emperor's sons, for all that these came draped in the skins of the innocent. Mericus shook off his dismay and ran to where the Ultramarine had collapsed.

'My lord, can you get up?'

The warrior had difficulty speaking. His teeth were gritted hard, his muscles quivered. 'Pain… spike… Neck port… Pull it out!'

Mericus ran his hand over the back of the Space Marine's neck. The skin felt odd under his fingers. A circle of scarring drew his fingers inward, and he found a hard metal socket in the back of the warrior's neck. There was something stuck into it. With a jerk, he yanked it free. The Space Marine screamed in agony, but as his pain was voiced, it was gone.

An expression of intense fury crossed the legionary's face. He reached for the Night Lord's dropped bolt pistol and brought it up to point in Mericus' direction. The Sothan fumbled his rifle in response.

The Space Marine fired a single shot between Mericus' legs. He spun around to see the first Night Lord sinking back into the water, red pumping from his shattered throat.

'I am Brother-Sergeant Solus,' said the Space Marine, apparently unconcerned by the sight.

'Mericus… Sergeant M-Mericus Girald-dus,' Mericus stammered.

Solus got to his feet, seemingly none the worse for his ordeal. Mericus felt intensely awkward at having touched him.

‘Well, Sergeant Mericus – it seems I owe you my thanks.’

‘You owe Hanspire your thanks, not me,’ said Mericus angrily. ‘He died to save you. I’m still alive. Then there’s Jonno there, he killed the other.’

‘A good shot.’

‘An *excellent* shot,’ said Mericus, all his rage at the Space Marines and his feelings of helplessness packed through those three words. Solus regarded him emotionlessly.

‘You should take my thanks, whether you think you deserve them or not. You and I are not long for this world. Konrad Curze’s murderers have overrun the city. Leave.’

‘No,’ said Mericus through gritted teeth.

‘No?’ said Solus. ‘It is self-evident. No theoretical. We are past supposition, only the actual exists. Flight is the only option for you.’

‘I mean, come with me. We have a place. Somewhere safe.’

‘There is nowhere safe.’

‘Safer, then. Come to the mountain. We’re regrouping there. Sotha needs you.’

Solus nodded. This too, was apparently a self-evident truth. He fell in with Mericus’ depleted squad, and they left as quickly as they dared.

Somehow they made it through the grey dawn-lit fields. They ascended the mountain, Sothopolis in flames behind them. The fighting around the castellum had subsided. By the time the group of soldiers had mounted a ridge sufficiently high for them to see its broken defences, the main gate hung open. The gaping doors cast a rhomboid of yellow light on the road. Tiny figures of legionaries moved within, dwarfed by massive siege tanks.

The sun was up in the red sky and they were close to their refuge when the screaming started. Mericus had been on the mountain many times when the colony’s schola had put out the students for their recreation time. It was surprising how far away a playground full of happy children could be heard. Their high cries and bubbling chatter carried for miles.

The noise that came up from the centre of town was a little like that, a distant chorus of high noises underpinned by a frantic hubbub. Only the high notes were bloodcurdling screams and not shrieks of delight, and the hubbub was a wailing rich with fear.

Mericus stopped. The sun was shining in his face and he had to scrunch his eyes tight to see anything of the town. A pall of blue smoke made its shattered buildings into meaningless blocks. The central square was a dark pit. Nothing could be seen in detail there, only distant sparks of flame that must have been huge fires. Threads of oily black climbed up to flatten themselves on the blue. He kept his eyes fixed on the central square for as long as he could.

Fires and noise filled the square every midsummer, but now the Night Lords held a festival of their own there.

The Ultramarine brought up the rear of the column, Morio flung over his shoulder,

shepherding a knot of tired people. They had encountered a few more on the way back. These were the old, the very young. They clustered round Brother Solus, close as crustaceans on a rock.

Solus carried a bolter taken from the drop pod wreck on their return. With a weapon in his hands, he looked formidable, though he still lacked for armour.

The Space Marine stopped by Mericus.

'Do not look back. There is nothing you can do for them, save to survive and avenge them another day.'

Mericus looked up at the grim giant. He blinked. His eyes were gritty, but no tears would come.

'Why do they do it?' he said.

'Because they can,' the Ultramarine said.

'So could you,' said Mericus. 'You are the same.'

'And I do not. That is the difference between a son of Ultramar and a murderer of Nostramo. We are the same and we are not the same. The Emperor in His wisdom made it so.' He rested a massive hand on Mericus' shoulder. 'Do not sorrow. We shall all die, but my gene-father will see them pay for what they have done.'

The old Mericus would have cracked a joke, but the old Mericus was dead in the wreck of the city.

Feeling sick, he turned his back on his countrymen, and followed the line of civilians into the safety of the mountain.

SEVENTEEN

Master of Macragge
Dantioch's message
Nova

Guilliman came to the Pharos locus as soon as the news of the attack reached his ears. Full of wrath he strode into the ruins of the Chapel of Memorial. Behind him came his assembled senior officers, all the Chapter Masters of the Ultramarines on Macragge, and representatives from every other Legion present. They jogged to keep up with the primarch's furious pace. Then came the human members of his war council at a full run, men from the Imperial Adepta, the Astra Telepathica, the government of Macragge, their aides, their servants. The frailest lagged far behind.

The Lord of Macragge did not wait for them. He came to a halt at the boundary of the Pharos' communications field, right before Dantioch's seat. His expression was unreadable, but his anger roared through the Pharos with the force of a blow. Polux thought that if Guilliman were to take another step he would leave Macragge behind again whether he wished to or not. That would be a disastrous eventuality, and he willed the primarch to remain safely where he was.

Dantioch began to rise, but Guilliman held out his hand, palm flat.

'Sit, Dantioch, report. Tell me what occurs at Sotha.' The primarch's face was regal as ever, but his voice was clotted with supressed emotion.

Dantioch sank stiffly back into his chair, his neck craning so that he could look up at his commander. Guilliman had enough presence of mind, even in the depths of his fury, to notice the discomfort that caused him and took a step backwards. Polux felt a little easier at that.

'The emperor?'

'I will advise him once I am apprised of the situation,' said Guilliman hotly. 'Report!'

'Very well,' said Dantioch. 'We are under attack by a large force of the Eighth Legion. They came upon Sotha unobserved, in direct opposition to the Pharos' interference field. They have taken the city, my lord, and the orbital has fallen.'

Guilliman's lips thinned and became paler.

'What of the Aegida company? What is the fate of my Hundred and Ninety-Ninth?'

'As per Captain Adallus' rota, half were in the castellum, half aboard the orbital.'

An Ultramarines provost stepped forwards to Dantioch's side. 'The castellum was taken this morning, my lord.'

'Sergeant Achamenides,' said Guilliman, displaying the keen faculties of his memory. It was said that he knew every one of his sons by sight and name. Polux could believe it was

true.

‘Yes, my lord. We gave as good account as we could, my lord, but there were some six thousand arrayed against us. We had too few to repel their attack, and they landed siege tanks as soon as they had overwhelmed our air defence. I… I am sorry, my lord.’

‘It is I who should apologise to you, my son,’ said Guilliman grimly. ‘You killed many of theirs?’

‘Kill ratio statistics suggest five of theirs died for every one of ours.’

‘You did well.’

Achamenides bowed his head hesitantly, made to speak, thought better of it, and stepped back.

‘When the castellum fell, some of the Hundred and Ninety-Ninth’s number made their way into the mountain,’ said Dantioch.

‘How many?’ said Guilliman.

Dantioch paused. ‘There are fifty-six here with Achamenides. Thirty, perhaps forty more entered lower down and took refuge in the catacombs. I do not have precise numbers. The Night Lords are beginning to foray into the lower caves, and we can hear fighting. But we cannot contact our own forces by vox, not from here.’

‘Less than a hundred men from a thousand.’ The grief in Guilliman’s eyes brimmed over, swamping his impassive expression.

‘They were sorely outnumbered, Lord Guilliman. There are at least ten thousand of the enemy here, probably more,’ said Polux.

‘You asked for more men, captain.’

‘I did.’

Polux’s face was as stony as Guilliman’s. He did not care to hide his opinions from his superiors.

‘But the Lion vetoed the request.’

‘Yes, he did, my lord,’ said Polux. ‘You agreed with him.’

‘Would that I had not! Secrecy, he said, is better than an iron defence!’ Guilliman spoke through gritted teeth, his fists clenched. ‘I followed his counsel, and we are close to disaster! And where is he now?’

‘My lord, anything less than a fifth of a Legion would not have aided us, the enemy came in such great numbers,’ said Polux.

‘And yet you are there and he is not. Do not defend my brother, Alexis Polux. He shall answer to me himself.’

‘The picket ships did not detect the enemy, lord,’ said Polux.

‘Do you have any indication where they came from?’ asked Verus Caspean, master of the

Ultramarines First Chapter. ‘My lord Guilliman, we must be alert to further attacks on our territory.’

‘They must have been nearby for some time,’ said the primarch before Dantioch or Polux could answer. ‘Perhaps even before we ignited the Pharos, certainly long enough to gather information as to our weaknesses.’ Guilliman’s powerful intellect overrode his emotions, and he paced back and forth across the broken floor of the chapel, brows knotted in concentration.

Through the empathic capabilities of the Pharos, both Polux and Dantioch felt his fury ebb as his titanic intelligence came into play.

‘It’s the most plausible explanation. Curze! I sense Curze’s hand behind this. He was here, right in this chapel, and now his Legion is there…’ He tapped at his chest, armoured fingers stirring the many decorations hanging there. ‘Or is it coincidence? Both are possible. I need more information.’

‘This attack is either an anomaly or the beginning of something bigger,’ said Dantioch.

‘How much can Curze know of the beacon’s importance or capability?’ Guilliman murmured. ‘What is his purpose? These are the questions we must ask ourselves. Theoretical, he knows nothing. We know precious little ourselves. Curze comes here by chance aboard my brother’s ship – another damnable secret!’ His composure slipped a little, but was quickly reimposed. ‘His Legion, fleeing the Thramas Crusade, arrives at Sotha some time ago, by chance. It is on the fringes of my territory, and poorly mapped. They hide somewhere outside the system boundaries, they see the Pharos and are drawn in. It is our ill fortune that their numbers are so much larger than ours. Or…’

He slapped his fist into the other huge palm.

‘Theoretical – Curze arrives here. The Pharos’ importance is obvious, even to his twisted mind. He communicates with his Legion, perhaps through the Pharos itself. He was within the chapel for minutes. He possesses some of our father’s mental ability, after all. Could he have been in communication with his fleet astropaths even while you fought him, Polux?’

‘Is that possible, do we know?’ asked Maglios, lieutenant of the primarch’s Invictus bodyguard. ‘What do you say, Lord Prayto? Have the Librarius any further insight to offer in the matter?’

Titus Prayto stepped forwards. He was the master of the presiding centuria, in the continued absence of their Chief Librarian, Lord Promus. ‘We have investigated the possibility of furthering the range of psychic communication via the Pharos beam,’ he said. ‘It was not… amenable to the operation.’

‘But we cannot know for certain that it is impossible,’ said Sergio, one of his attendant Epistolaries. ‘I have been to Sotha and spoken with those who were touched by the device’s influence. My time in the vicinity of the mountain revealed nothing conclusive to me. We might yet succeed.’

‘And Curze is a primarch,’ agreed Prayto. ‘His psychic ability is raw and aggressive, but

potentially great. Nonetheless, is it not simply more likely that his commanders have engaged opportunistically, hoping to draw us out?'

'Striking at Macragge, at the capital?' said Tetrarch Valentus Dolor, the primarch's champion. 'Lorgar's zealots tried that already, and they failed. Curze's Legion is weaker both in numbers and discipline. He is mad, but he is not a fool – he would not order that.'

'Maybe,' said Guilliman. 'And how can he communicate this through the storm, if he did not exploit the Pharos beam?'

'I do not think it likely he used the Pharos, my lord,' said Dantioch. 'He was only within the point of illumination. He could not have been able to use it, even if he were aware of its capabilities. The whole time he was there while the Pharos was active, he was engaged in combat.'

'Even so, we have to view this from the position of worst case theoretical,' said Guilliman. 'An organised attack with some strategic aim. The end result is the same, whether this is blind coincidence, the deliberate work of Curze, or fate arranged by some diabolical entity of the warp.' His head twitched at the mention of such things, a tiny shake of denial. He was still coming to terms with the truths hidden from him by his father. 'Or most likely, some combination of all of these possibilities. The causes are somewhat irrelevant. We must ask ourselves, what do the Night Lords hope to achieve?'

Dantioch began to speak, but the scream of a flight of gunships chancing an approach to the mountain drowned him out. The flat note of anti-aircaft fire from the Emperor's Watch thudded around Primary Location Alpha. The Pharos' image shivered at the interruption.

'They do not want to destroy the beacon, or we would already be dead,' Dantioch eventually managed.

'We can be clear on that,' said Polux. 'They besiege the mountain when they could reduce it to rubble from orbit.'

Guilliman grinned, an almost feral expression that Polux had never seen in his face before. 'Fortunate for me I have two experts in that field of war to hand! We shall stand shoulder to shoulder in glorious battle! I shall lead as many men through the Pharos field as we can, sally forth from the mountain and smash this attack before it goes any further.'

Mutters of concern went around Guilliman's assembled aides.

'My lord, you cannot!' said Polux.

'Your concern is noted, but do not presume to tell me what I can and cannot do, Polux.'

A babble of conflicting voices filled the shell of the Chapel of Memorial. Dantioch shouted.

'Peace!' He had to do so twice before the arguments subsided. 'Peace, brothers! We cannot bicker among ourselves while the traitors are at the gate! Polux is correct, Lord Guilliman. To bring you here alone or with a handful of your men, what will that achieve? We have a slender chance of breaking out traded for the near certainty of your loss. The loyalist war effort would be dealt a terrible blow, from which it will never recover. We

cannot afford the risk.'

'I am a primarch,' said Guilliman.

'You are *one* primarch, against thousands of legionaries. You say the lord Lion is not present, and you, my lord, would not countenance risking the emperor in this venture.'

Guilliman breathed in heavily. 'No. You are correct. I would not.'

'How many men can we bring across before we are fully invested, or the Night Lords find a way into the mountain? A company? Two? For the moment the Night Lords show all signs of taking the Pharos, but they may grow tired of dying and obliterate us. They are capricious, it is in their nature to act unpredictably,' said Polux.

'The integrity of the field is delicate, and we cannot easily tune it. Although you yourself have used the device, my lord, Polux was able to step across only in time of great peril, when his life was in mortal danger,' said Dantioch.

'I'd suggest this is a time of great peril,' said Dolor. 'But I agree. You should not go, my lord. There is no retreat once the journey is undertaken. You cannot come back.'

'Surely there is time to take hundreds of men through, thousands?' said Caspean. 'With Lord Guilliman and the Emperor Sanguinius to lead them, they could cast back the invaders.'

'With respect, my lord Caspean, if the operation is so simple, step across,' said Dantioch.

'Very well.' Caspean strode right towards Dantioch's throne. It appeared he would step into Primary Location Alpha, but before he could reach the warsmith, his seemingly solid physical form faded. His footsteps continued and Dantioch had the ghostly feeling of something passing through him, as he had had many times before the device had been tuned.

Cursing came from behind them.

'As you can see, the machine is unpredictable. The translocation principle is not an exact science. We may succeed in bringing only a handful of warriors across, if any. I am sure you might make the proving step once more, Lord Guilliman, and the Emperor Sanguinius too… but the others?' Polux lifted his hand and dared point at the primarch. 'You recognise this for what it is.'

'Then give me a damn alternative, Polux! Do not build your walls in front of me!'

'We shall concentrate the beam on Macragge, to allow our ships passage here. We shall hold out as long as we might. If we are to fall, so be it. You can obliterate the enemy when you arrive, and take it back. We must keep their attention focused on taking the Pharos, encourage them not to destroy it. If we all fall, so be it. They shall never unlock the secrets before you arrive.'

'It will take a day, no more, to assemble a large enough retribution fleet from all three Legions, if need be,' said Dolor.

'This is a Thirteenth Legion problem,' said Guilliman. 'I will not involve my brothers.'

‘Then our own warriors should more than suffice, my lord,’ said Dolor. ‘How long will you be able to keep the beam focused? If it is cut off, we shall find ourselves with months of hard travel ahead, and nothing will be achieved.’

‘It would be better to handle this alone,’ said Maglios. ‘The entirety of the Blood Angels fleet will remain to defend Macragge, alongside elements of the First. It would be a poor practical to separate our forces without knowing the full extent of the challenge.’

Guilliman stood tall, and crossed his arms. ‘We need more time. Polux and Dantioch need help, so that they can keep the Pharos active for long enough so that we might reach them with overwhelming force. Preferably by surprise.’

‘A diversion?’

‘A distraction. A large enough fleet to draw some of the Night Lords away, keep their full attention off the Pharos. With luck, they may effect a landing and reinforce the troops within.’

‘The closer the better,’ said Dolor.

‘The *larger* the better,’ said Caspean.

‘Just so,’ said Dolor. ‘Are there any fleets that fulfil both criteria near enough to Sotha?’

‘Lucretius Corvo is currently at Beremin with six capital ships, two companies of the Thirteenth Legion and a demi-company of Dark Angels. With the light path of the Pharos, he could be there within–’

‘Eighteen hours, my lord,’ said Dantioch.

‘Indeed.’ Guilliman became decisive, the mood transmitted from the chapel ruins changing from dismay to resolution as his plan took shape in his mind. ‘There is no time to lose. Contact Corvo immediately. Fix the beam upon Beremin. By the time Corvo is at Sotha, we shall be ready. Tell him to engage in diversionary tactics, no direct confrontations. If he can, he will attempt a landing to reinforce Mount Pharos. Once he has arrived, re-establish contact with me, and focus the transit beam upon Macragge so that my fleet may set out in force.’

‘What if we should fail before he arrives, or before you arrive?’ said Dantioch. ‘We must prepare for all eventualities.’

‘Secondary orders – disable the Mechanicum machinery linked to the quantum engines to prevent the Night Lords utilising the Pharos. It will set us back months, but it is better than losing the beacon. In extremis, Corvo must destroy the Pharos itself,’ Guilliman concluded.

‘How will he take such an order from me, my lord? I am not known to him, and my kind are not trusted, with good reason.’

‘Your reputation is better than you think, warsmith.’ Guilliman’s face lifted a little at some pleasant recollection. ‘Remind him that he made a promise. He’ll understand. Can you hold the beacon until then?’

‘As far as we know, the enemy cannot conduct traditional teleportation through the light of the Pharos – their communications are disrupted by it. We have eighty of your Legion, the forty Lightkeepers of Captain Polux’s and the other Legions, a handful of auxilia, a single maniple of Legio Cybernetica Thallaxii, and a pair of war automata to hold a mountain full of holes against…’ Dantioch looked to Polux. ‘Ten to twenty thousand Night Lords?’

‘Your calculations are correct,’ said Polux. ‘Difficult odds, but not impossible.’

‘Then I will stand as I stood at the Schadenhold – alone in the face of treachery,’ said Dantioch. He pulled himself out of his chair and got down to one knee with obvious discomfort. ‘I swear to you, Lord of Ultramar, that I will prevail here, as I did there.’

‘You will not be alone,’ said Polux. ‘Not this time.’

‘I will make all haste to Sotha,’ said Guilliman. ‘Protect the Pharos, Warsmith Dantioch, if you can.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘I go to speak with my brother. Refocus the beam on Corvo. We shall speak again after his counter-attack is launched.’

Dantioch got up unsteadily and bowed. The image faded away. The warsmith and Captain Polux turned to face the assembled defenders of the Pharos. Men of Polux’s own Legion, a smattering of warriors from others, a battered remnant of the Aegida Company. A tattered wall to stop a tidal wave of violence.

‘We must prepare,’ said Polux. ‘All our efforts are needed, whether legionary, mortal or Mechanicum.’

From the back of the room where other warriors assembled, Datasmith Beta-Phi-97 chittered in binaric.

Beta-Phi’s young tech-adept assistant spoke for the datasmith. In contrast to Beta-Phi-97’s entirely metal visage, he was still mostly flesh. A single datacore tube bent out of his head through a gaping hole in his hood, its socket riveted to his bare scalp. ‘My master protests at the inclusion of Mechanicum constructs in the Pharos’ defensive assets. He insists his machines are not battle ready.’

‘Every hand is needed, be it of flesh or of steel,’ said Polux.

Magos Carantine spoke, ‘We are not Taghmata, captain. Warfare is not our prime function. We are of the Ordo Biologis. We are xenologists.’

The datasmith’s protest noises became emphatic. Carantine blurted something angry-sounding at him, and the two engaged in a ferocious, fast-paced symphony of data exchange.

‘The automata have long been used for peaceful purposes,’ translated the datasmith’s adept. ‘He is distressed at the thought of damage to such venerable machines. They are not blessed for combat.’

Polux gave the younger man such a look he shrank back apologetically. ‘Tell him to fit them with weapons and prime their data-wafers for belligerence, or everyone in this mountain will die. Is that choice binary enough for him?’

‘My master Beta-Phi-97 calculates twenty-seven per cent probability of death in the next hour.’

‘The odds will be worse without his machines. Time is short, and our enemies ready. We have plans to make.’

Lucretius Corvo, captain of the 90th ‘Nova’ Company of the Ultramarines, was deep in concentration. Upon the lectern he kept in his dayroom – he always stood to read – was a text of ancient Terran battle-sagas from the ship’s library. Despite their archaic and somewhat sanguinary nature, he was thoroughly engrossed. There were echoes of the present in the exploits of these long-gone tribes. Such savagery he had seen from the traitors, particularly the World Eaters, that he had become somewhat single-minded in seeking out historical examples of the same. What education he might gain from this activity he was not sure, but he had come to look forward to the brief times he had for reading. For all his cold manner, Corvo enjoyed stories.

A discreet cough made him raise his head. It was a mark of his nature that the only sign of the immense surprise he experienced was a slight raising of his eyebrows.

One side of his quarters had disappeared. In its place was an image of a large cavern of sinuous, glossy black stone, dimly lit and crammed with ugly cogitator banks. At first he thought he looked into a Mechanicum facility, for the Mechanicum rarely bothered applying fine aesthetics to devices made for their own uses. Then he saw the essayer of the cough, a masked figure in battered Mark III war-plate seated in a heavy wooden chair, and he realised what he saw.

‘Warsmith Dantioch, I presume?’ said Corvo. He shut his book softly and came out from behind the lectern to better regard the room that should not be there. He passed his hand over the boundary between ship and mountain. That the air did not change temperature or consistency told him what he saw was simply an image, but every other sense denied its illusory nature. ‘This must be the marvel of the Pharos,’ he added, once he had examined the phenomenon to his satisfaction. ‘I am impressed.’

‘I *am* Barabas Dantioch,’ said the warsmith. He spoke raspingly, the words catching in his throat. ‘And this *is* the Pharos.’

‘To what do I owe this honour? We have not spoken before.’

‘Until now, your orders have not needed to be updated, Captain Corvo. Now they do. Listen to me well, for I have news of the gravest import and a new command from your primarch. Sotha is under attack by an overwhelming force of the Night Lords. Roboute Guilliman orders you to our aid.’

Corvo remained as expressionless as a stone. ‘Your reputation precedes you, warsmith, and I am aware of the importance of the beacon. But this is no routine change. How will you verify these orders?’

‘Guilliman himself gave them. He said that if you were to question them, I was to remind you of a promise you made him.’

A rare smile crossed Corvo’s face, gone so quickly that its existence was debatable.

‘Not only him. A promise I made to my birth-father first, and that I will forever stand by – to always remember who I am, and who I have been.’ Corvo nodded. ‘I also remember who it is that I serve. Very well. We shall come to you, Warsmith Dantioch. Allow me a few moments to confer with my staff officers and the fleet, then you must tell me all you can.’

‘There is no time. We are under siege. We must talk now.’

Corvo nodded again. He waved down a hovering vox-horn in the form of a singing naiad from her pedestal in the room’s decorations.

‘Fleet wide vox-cast. Authority eight-four, nine-seven.’

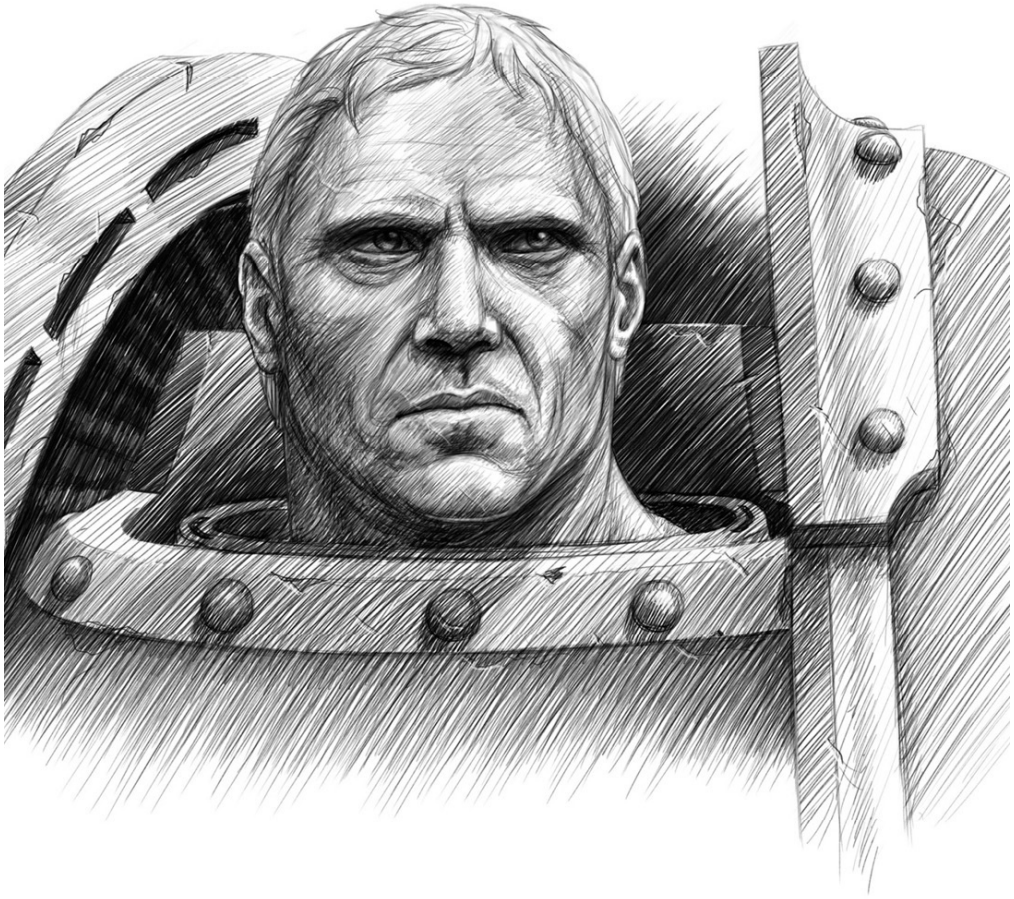
‘*Actuated,*’ said the immobile lips of the naiad.

‘Attention all hands. This is Captain Corvo. Prepare for immediate departure. All crew are to be recalled from dock. Suspend resupply.’ The captain’s voice echoed throughout the ship a fraction of a second after he spoke. ‘My shipmasters and officers will take care of the rest, warsmith.’

He looked expectantly at Dantioch. Corvo was not easily given to amazement, but the clarity of the image fascinated him.

The warsmith spoke rapidly, his breathless voice struggling to impart the information he must. Corvo listened without interruption.

By the time Dantioch had finished, Corvo’s fleet was casting off from high anchor at Beremin, and making all haste to Sotha.



Captain Alexis Polux, from Dantioch's sketchbook

EIGHTEEN

A primarch enraged
Lord Protector
The Emperor of Man

The favoured sons of Sanguinius, Chapter Master Raldoron and Azkaellon of the Sanguinary Guard, were in deep consultation with their primarch when the doors to the throne room burst open, causing their hands to fly to their weapons.

Roboute Guilliman stormed into the chamber.

‘Brother?’ said Sanguinius.

Guilliman’s famous poise had deserted him entirely. His noble features were contorted, his skin flushed, his lips pressed so tightly they had turned white.

Guilliman marched right up to the Primarch of the Blood Angels. All his usual manners had gone. He spoke so forcefully he spat.

‘Where is he? Where has our brother gone?’ Guilliman roared.

‘My lord–’ began Azkaellon.

Guilliman rounded on Sanguinius’ sons, seeing them for the first time. ‘You two, leave us!’

Azkaellon and Raldoron looked to each other.

‘Now! Out!’

Sanguinius nodded his head a fraction.

‘My lord primarchs,’ said Azkaellon and bowed.

Raldoron opened his mouth to speak, but the look Sanguinius fixed him with froze the words in his mouth. ‘My lords,’ he managed. They took their leave in silence.

Azkaellon shut the gilded doors to Sanguinius’ audience chamber behind him.

Sanguinius’ wings shivered, his ire kindled at his brother’s behaviour. He stood tall, radiant beyond compare. His god-like form was clad in simple robes, but his wings and shoulders were draped in golden chains dripping with ruby blood-drops.

Sanguinius drew himself up and looked down upon his brother. ‘Do not speak to my sons so, Roboute. They are loyal beyond words, and should not suffer your wrath. Especially when that anger is born from your own failings.’

‘You… You have heard?’

‘Of what transpires on Sotha? Yes, even though you did not see fit to inform me before you spoke with your captains.’

Guilliman’s face was purple with rage. They were siblings. As Sanguinius was capable of

great rage, so was his brother. Guilliman might hide it under a calculating exterior, but they were all demigods, and had emotions of an intensity in accord with their stature. A primarch's humours were as complex and unpredictable as an ocean, but few ever saw this side of Roboute.

He paced back and forth across the room before the emperor's throne three times, then strode to the wall and punched it with all his gene-forged might. The stone cracked, shards of it pattering to the floor, and powdered plaster sifted down after it. He leaned his head against the stone and let out a strangled noise. When he stood again, he had regained some of his composure.

'I am sorry, my lord.'

Sanguinius' own annoyance was quickly snuffed. 'My lord? You come to me *second* and call me "my lord"?'

'I–'

'It is all right, Roboute. I understand. You are here now. I goad you a little. I understand why you did not come here first. My real point is, must we keep up this charade when we are on our own? I am no more Emperor than Azkaellon is.'

Guilliman blew out a long and measured breath. His voice was hoarse with emotion. 'You are, Sanguinius. You are the emperor until we can confirm our father is truly gone.'

The Angel's wings twitched, the bells and chains adorning them tinkled. 'When we are alone, I am not. Do not set me over yourself, not truly in your hearts, not even for the sake of form. We have seen the poison that summons. Keep it the pretence that it is, at least between we two and the Lion.'

'Very well. Yes, you are correct. Of course,' said Guilliman.

'I have never seen you so gripped by rage. You are normally so… calm.'

'Oh, I have my moments,' said Guilliman. He resumed his pacing, slower now, his emotions harnessed again. 'With Sotha attacked, everything we have striven to build here is under threat. Without the Pharos, Ultramar will slip back into disorganisation. We will not be able to effectively coordinate our forces, nor hold the territory we have. Taking the war to Horus will be out of the question. So I ask you, where is he? Where is the Lion?'

'The Lord Protector is not performing his role, it appears.'

'You mean to tell me, Sanguinius, that he mentioned nothing of his purpose to you?'

'I presume he told you nothing either, else you would not be asking.' Sanguinius took up a goblet and flask of wine from a table at the side of the room and poured his brother a drink. 'Here, I think you need this.'

Guilliman took the drink and drained it in one draught. 'He told me…'

'…that he was to patrol the outer marches,' they said together.

'Typically obtuse.'

‘But where is he? If he really is patrolling the outer marches, he should have caught this infiltration of Ultramar,’ said Guilliman. ‘I question how much farther he has been able to travel without our knowledge.’

‘You know what he will say should you confront him.’

Guilliman’s lips curled. ‘“Operational sensivity! Now is not the time! To be effective in war, one must be mysterious! Why should I keep your worlds for you, when you cannot keep them yourself?” Something like that.’ Guilliman looked like he would slam his goblet down into the table, shattering both, but he placed it upon the surface with exaggerated care. ‘The Lion keeps his own secrets close, pries those of others from them, and then mocks them for their lack of understanding. I know what he will say well enough, believe me.’ The primarch looked tired. ‘But another thing he will say, and I will have to accept it without bitterness or rancour, is that I did agree with him that maintaining a light watch on Sotha was the only viable practical. Any more than the Aegida would surely have drawn unwanted attention onto the system. That was my theoretical. Alexis Polux said otherwise, and Dantioch would not gainsay us but I believe he felt the same.’

‘And unwanted attention has been drawn, and they have insufficient forces to keep it at bay.’

‘Curse it all, Sanguinius, I should have anticipated this!’ said Guilliman. ‘Curze’s appearance here on Macragge has something to do with it. It has to. He was testing our defences. He saw the Pharos, what it can do. Somehow he has communicated with his rabble of murderers and brought them down on the system. This new attack cannot simply be chance. It is impossible.’

‘You exaggerate.’

‘Improbable, then. But I cannot see the truth of it. I chase my own tail endlessly. The Lion has some business in this too – blast him and his closed mouth! We should censure him when he returns, you and I. He has failed his emperor. Punish him.’

‘Absolutely not.’ Sanguinius’ mouth set resolutely. ‘I will not rebuke him, Roboute. I will not shame him. I will not make it appear that I value your words over his. We are in this together. I will not take on a mantle as weighty as Horus’. If he is to be taken to task we shall do it as brothers, not as overlord and servant. I refuse.’

Guilliman sat upon the steps of the throne dais. Sanguinius settled himself beside him.

‘How has it come to this?’ asked the Angel quietly. ‘Where did it all begin to go wrong? Why did Father lie to us?’

‘He had His reasons, I am sure,’ said Guilliman heavily. He looked to his brother. ‘Over the last few months I have come to think that…’ He held up his hands, searching for the right word. ‘I have come to *see* that the role of emperor sits ill with you, and that you are unhappy.’

‘Forever are others seeking to force me to their own end. Father, Horus, now you. I will not allow it, Guilliman. I agreed to this extremity, but do not push me hard. I am in a mind to begin pushing back.’

‘Then why did you agree?’

Sanguinius gave a sad smile. He reached up to rub the eagle head of his throne’s armrest. ‘What choice did I have? It was the only viable *theoretical*.’

Guilliman smiled, the expression sorrowful, tinged with regret. ‘I did not mean to force it upon you, my brother.’

‘Ah, but you did. Or circumstances did.’

‘If you truly feel that way, I owe you my apologies,’ said Guilliman.

‘I respect that very much. It is hard for one such as you to apologise, I know. Your plans are everything. If you must apologise, then your plans were insufficient.’

‘I do not like to be wrong,’ said Guilliman, and there was such chill sincerity to the words that Sanguinius was moved to touch his brother’s arm in sympathy.

‘Do not fret, Roboute. I took up your offer reluctantly but willingly. We are all prisoners of fate.’

‘Now you sound like Curze.’

‘Never. Fate tries to trap us, but for it to succeed then we must give in to it. Fate demands complicity from its victims, and I am no victim. Neither of us are.’

Guilliman and Sanguinius looked up to the throne behind them, gleaming in its pool of light, as if there would appear sat upon it their true father, smiling and powerful, and He would set everything to rights.

‘What happened to you, Sanguinius? There is a burden on you greater than that of Imperium Secundus.’

‘Is there a greater weight than that, truly?’

‘What happened at Signus Prime. That might be.’

‘Nothing of import happened, not relevant to our situation now.’ Sanguinius sighed. He was tired of his brothers fishing for details of Signus, tired of waiting for the moment that one of his many sons might let some detail slip in error. He was not ready to speak of it, and he did not know if he ever would be. ‘Be content with that answer. I will not discuss it further. The pertinent question is, what will you do about this setback?’

‘It is a setback. Yes. That is all,’ said Guilliman. Fresh resolve entered him. ‘What do you think I will do? My marshals are gathering my fleet as we speak. We will fall upon Sotha with such a fury that the Night Lords will never dare the borders of my realm again.’

‘Your realm? Are we to start speaking in such terms once more? Are things so hopeless?’

‘You misunderstand my meaning.’

‘Perhaps I understand better than you. This was always your realm, Roboute.’

‘No. It is not. I hold it in trust for humanity. You are the emperor, not I.’

‘And what of the distance? Will you keep the Pharos’ beam focused upon you? We deny

ourselves communications if so.'

'The fleet will be ready by the morning. There is another fleet on its way, small, but they should buy some time. If not, then I trust Dantioch. He and Polux are well fitted for this task. Their presence, more than anything, gives me hope.'

'Hope alone is a poor strategy. Hope forces us into the cruel hands of fate again.'

Guilliman shrugged. 'Whatever happens, I will have vengeance.'

'And so we fall a little further from the light.'

'These are dark times. I depart tomorrow. You will be regent emperor and master of Ultramar both while I am gone.'

'But I would fight by your side! It is too long since I immersed myself in battle.'

'Sanguinius, you cannot.'

Sanguinius shook out his wings in irritation. 'So I am to stay here and continue this pantomime – a pretender ruling a pale reminder of what once was?'

'It is not that, brother.' Guilliman held up his hands. 'We cannot all risk ourselves, that is a fact. More than that, I need you here should Curze return, or the Night Lords launch an attack on Macragge. The assault on Sotha could be a diversion. Your Legion remains here. If he comes at us, it is better if one of us is here to greet him.'

'Then let me go. Let me take my angels and bring judgement to the Nostramans. Your people need you.'

'No. This is my fight, Sanguinius. Curze must be taught a lesson by *me.* It is my home he has invaded, my chapel he profaned, my… Euten. He threatened Euten.' He became quiet a moment, thinking on Curze's cruel rampage and how close he had come to losing the ageing chamberlain, the closest he had ever had to a mother figure. 'He is evil. Sick. He would risk everything to hurt us. It is a mark of his insanity. I will not let another wreak my vengeance.'

'Very well. But I am not so sure that he is insane,' said Sanguinius. 'Sometimes I think he sees more clearly than any of us.'

Guilliman's eyes narrowed. 'Now you are being morose and defeatist, placing the views of that maniac over our own. Explain yourself.'

'Am I? Consider this then, Roboute. Our father kept the truth from us, the real truth. What else did He keep?'

'Sanguinius!'

The Angel placed his hands in front of him, palm to palm, and shut his perfect eyes. He was the living image of all the extinct religions – an angel resplendent in physical form. 'Please. I do not believe Father intended to sacrifice our entire species on the altar of His own apotheosis, I stand by His dreams still. But all this? Daemons? *Gods*? The things that He told us were not real *are* real. He must have known! If He had warned us, if He had

told the truth, we could have armed ourselves against it. His lack of trust in us was His undoing.'

'We might have sought it out, like Horus did.'

'Did Horus seek out the darkness, or did it find him? You knew our brother – he was proud, and ambitious, but he was noble, and in many respects the best of us. If he was tempted in ignorance, then how could he have protected himself? There is more to this than Horus' lust for power.'

'What are you saying?' Guilliman became suspicious. For a moment, Sanguinius was sure his brother saw through him to his own temptation on Signus Prime, and the anguish it still brought him. He dropped his hands to his side.

'I do not truly know. Thoughts, nothing more.'

'The time for thinking is done. Action will save us now.' Guilliman stood and turned his back to his brother in clear signal that the conversation was over. His boots were at the threshold before Sanguinius spoke and stopped him.

'Brother,' he said. 'Be careful.'

Guilliman rested his weight against the doors. He half turned his head backwards.

'Brother, when have you ever known me to be reckless?'

He hauled on the great handles and stepped out. The doors boomed shut behind him.

'Too many times,' said Sanguinius to the empty throne room.

NINETEEN

Automata
Soul of the machine
Blind alleys

Excepting Kellendvar and Kellenkir, Skraivok's company had not been included in the festival of flesh in the city's market square. Skraivok crouched in a hollow surrounded by stinking, charcoaled trees while a Mechanicum construct did its utmost to end his life.

The worst of it was that the machine would not even enjoy the act should it succeed. There was something incredibly disheartening about fighting unthinking machines.

A fresh line of Night Lords prepared to charge up the incline.

The war construct was one of two blocking strategic entrances to the mountain, both massive Thanatar-Calix class Castellax automata. Krukesh had given Skraivok's company the dubious honour of taking one of them down. 'Theirs' stood a little way back in the tunnel, the entrance plugged with a uni-directional energy shield that allowed it to fire outwards, but did not permit fire in. The shield sparkled out a sheet of silver as bolt-rounds smacked into it. In response the automaton swung its massive arm around, mauler cannon blazing.

A Night Lord was hit full in the chest. The machine's bolt-cannon was loaded with some kind of exotic incendiary ammunition, and bright light burned from every joint in the victim's armour. His lenses burst outwards as jets of fire shot from his skull. Shattered metal glowing red with heat clattered to the ground, igniting what little vegetation remained as it scattered itself down the mountainside.

A large-calibre round whined over Skraivok's head. Where that was going to land was anyone's guess.

'Any news from Twenty-Third Company?' he muttered to Gallivar.

'Negative, claw master. Their Claws Three through Ten have run into significant Legion resistance in the lower halls. Claw Twelve has disappeared, no more contact.'

'Our warriors go in and do not return. The paths are not safe,' said Karrig Vorsh.

'I thank you for your startling strategic insights, brother.'

'I seek to fulfil my role, claw master, as your humble advisor,' said Vorsh.

'What of the Seventh? Where is Gesh?'

Gallivar adjusted his nuncio-vox. With the extended array on his backpack, he was the bigger target of the three of them and so had the safest spot in the hollow. Standard vox wasn't powerful enough to cut through the beacon's interference field even at such short ranges. If Skraivok didn't need him and his nuncio so much, he'd have ordered him to exchange places.

‘The Seventh Company are in the same situation, my lord. They cannot get through the energy field of the second construct. They are suffering heavy casualties.’

‘We should have got through by now,’ said Skraivok. A run of depressing outcomes crowded his mind.

‘I have been watching, and I do not believe this is a standard Thanatar energy matrix,’ said Vorsh. ‘It is a static field, perhaps a standard excavation bracing field, turned on its side. It is a match for any static shielding, in the right circumstances.’

‘Did I mention my thanks earlier?’

‘They’re not mobile,’ continued Vorsh, ignoring both the content and tone of his commander’s words. ‘The machine cannot get out.’

‘While we cannot get in!’ Skraivok closed his hand around a fistful of blackened soil. ‘Send in another three claws, we will attempt the cave one more time.’

‘We will still have to get through the machine’s atomantic projector, if we bring down the bracing field,’ warned Vorsh.

Skraivok cursed fluidly in basest Nostraman gutter talk. ‘There must be a way around these mechanical bastards.’

Puffs of dust and rock chips burst from the ground in front of the hollow. Skraivok pressed back into the dirt. Debris rattled off his armour. ‘Are you sure they can’t hit us from here, Gallivar?’

‘Yes, claw master. Almost certain.’

‘”Almost certain” does not inspire confidence, brother.’ He routed his vox through Gallivar’s equipment. ‘Claw Leader Forvian of Claw Fourteen, attack. Claws Five and Ten provide covering fire. Ten, synchronise your fire. Bring that field down!’

There were rebellious words from several brothers on the vox-net, but the legionaries advanced into the teeth of the automaton’s barrage.

Claw Ten carried anti-armour weaponry; six lascannons and four missile launchers. The mix was not to Legion protocol, but uniformity had not been Skraivok’s priority of late, along with so many of their old ways. They set up in a good position to the left of the trail, hiding behind a stand of blazing trees. They opened fire with stabbing beams of light and swift rockets. Where they hit the bubble of energy protecting the war-construct, the light rippled. The energy field grew brighter, and the amount of fire coming from the cave mouth diminished.

‘It’s working!’ shouted Forvian.

‘Now! Advance!’ commanded Skraivok.

Claw Fourteen broke into a run, howling Nostraman war-cries. Skraivok thought it pointless, as they would be lost on the construct, but it was good for morale. The rushing Space Marines made it close to the cave entrance, and Skraivok tensed in anticipation of success.

‘They are going to make it,’ said Vorsh disbelievingly.

They did not. Evidently the plodding machine mind of the construct had been formulating new firing solutions. An invisible energy wave from the anvil-shaped graviton ram of the Castellax’s right hand carried the Night Lords down the steep slope as easily as leaves on a strong wind. The wave shut off, dropping warriors into uncontrolled tumbles. Trails of blazing energy scoured Claw Ten from the mountainside, to be rapidly followed by roaring blasts of phosphorus-laced promethium that dazzled every Night Lord in sight. By the time Skraivok had recovered, the surviving elements of Claw Fourteen were retreating in disarray down the hill, and the battle automaton had gone back to its tireless fire sweep of the approach.

‘Well, that worked well,’ said Vorsh sarcastically. ‘Never mind, I never much liked Forvian.’

Skraivok clenched his fists. Rock chips ground in his hand. The automaton stood in its cave mouth, methodically shooting at anything that presented itself as a target. The rate of fire was phenomenal.

‘We could just wait for it to run out of ammunition,’ said Vorsh.

‘There has got to be another way,’ growled Skraivok.

‘What?’ said Vorsh. ‘The slope is too steep for the tanks, artillery’s too imprecise, and to get an accurate enough airstrike, the gunship would have to get too close. We will damage the tunnel system.’

‘That’s it! That is it,’ said Skraivok.

‘What is?’

‘Our orders are to take the tunnels intact, correct?’

‘Yes, I do not see–’

‘Nobody said anything about the *mountain*. The mountain! Gallivar, organise me an airstrike. Have them target the rock above the tunnel. Nothing too devastating, enough to bring down a few hundred tons of rubble. Vorsh, round up anyone with a heavy weapon. Have them group as close as possible to the cave mouth without getting into the line of fire. As close as possible! That is important. As soon as I give the word, get either side of the cave.’

‘We will be cut to pieces,’ protested Vorsh.

The others could hear the grin in Skraivok’s voice.

‘No, you won’t.’

The request was sent and acknowledged.

A minute later three missiles sped in on hissing flames. The construct identified the threat and shot one down, but was too sluggish to catch the other two. The rockets impacted in the stone above the tunnel, bringing an avalanche of smoking rock onto the cave mouth.

So much of the debris rolled off the bracing field and bounced away down the mountain that Skraivok feared his plan would not work. But then a massive boulder came loose in one piece, slid down and stopped immovably upon the narrow flat area before the cave mouth. The rubble that followed gathered around it, collecting into a thick wall of shattered stone against the bracing field. When the dust cleared, the tunnel mouth was stoppered up.

'Vorsh, now!' urged Skraivok. He stood up and powered up the hill directly at the cave, Gallivar coming faithfully behind him.

A dozen Space Marines bearing all manner of anti-armour weaponry ran as best they could up the treacherous slope to the sides of the cave mouth.

Skraivok took his time, picking his route carefully. Others raised their heads at their claw master's progress. When no harm came to him, several claws left their hiding places, and followed behind him.

'We are hiding here so that when the construct bursts out of the rubble it will not slaughter us,' said Vorsh. 'I do not think your plan of standing right in front of it will work, my lord.'

'Someone needs to keep it busy,' said Skraivok, and did not move.

The rock wall sagged inward as the bracing field was shut off. The stone locked together feebly, and then flew out in all directions as the machine employed its graviton ram. Skraivok's men scattered to newer hiding places. Skraivok's response was to raise his volkite serpenta.

The machine's arm swept through the hole made by its ram, demolishing the upper half of the wall. But the lower portion, centred on the large boulder, remained sound.

The automaton marched forward in order to clear its firing position. The war-constructs of the Mechanicum were very destructive, but limited in thought.

The machine bent low, bringing its blank-faced, off-set head to look upon the claw master.

'Destroy it,' said Skraivok.

Criss-crossed lascannon fire mixed with missiles, heavy bolter rounds and grav-cannon distortion columns slammed into the machine from both sides. Its in-built atomantic field generators were impressive examples of Mechanicum technology, but rapidly overcome. With a thunderous crack, the field burst, and the intersecting heavy weapons fire punched smoking holes in the armour. The display was quite spectacular.

'Charge!' yelled Skraivok. He was first up the rock pile, his power sword out and volkite pistol thrumming with pent-up destructive energies. One final lascannon shot robbed the Thanatar of its shoulder-mounted weapon, and the Night Lords fell upon it.

'So deadly from afar, but less so close in,' said Skraivok to himself, dodging a clumsy swing from the automaton's fist and raking a deep furrow in the machine's leg with his sword. He opened his vox and raised his voice. 'Bring it down. Show its masters the

weakness of the machine in the teeth of the night!'

The displays grafted into Beta-Phi-97's empty eye sockets danced with reticules and targeting information. Damage indicators pulsed angrily alongside. Beta-Phi detached himself from Gamma Castellax's data-feed for a moment, and the datastream from Sigma expanded to fill his consciousness. Space Marines, tiny as tech acolytes fresh from the vat in comparison to the construct, hewed at his metal limbs, shattering ancient technology with their hateful weapons. The faces of those who fought bareheaded were contorted with vicious pleasure.

They were killing Sigma.

There was nothing Beta-Phi could do, so far away. Sigma could not be controlled nor reprogrammed remotely, and his battle protocols remained as they had been set: suppressive fire, protect the tunnel mouth. The thought to modify such technology to allow long-range operation would have horrified as dogmatic a mind as Beta-Phi's, and so he never considered it. All he could do was watch his charge die.

Forgotten nerves sent signals to glands and ducts that he had excised long ago. No tears did he have to shed, nor any fear to feel, but sorrow he had never lost, and guilt and shame, though dormant, were his to experience again. He insinuated his mind into Sigma's completely, riding it. He could not act to help Sigma, but he could feel its agony. He would not buffer the pain shunt. He would experience the death of his charge correctly. Beta-Phi shared Sigma's suffering via data communion.

Something sharp and electric shattered Sigma's kneecap, and it lurched to one side, unable to support itself. If Beta-Phi had had teeth to grit in sympathy, gritted they would have been. A garbled databurst burbled from his chest unit.

The enemy were all over Sigma, hacking and punching through his armour. Alarms went off on every system.

Quiet now, soothed Beta-Phi. *Quiet. Your service to the Omnissiah is noted, your serial shall be honoured. Quiet. Uploading data now. Your body dies, your logic patterns shall persist forever and ever. Praise the Machine.*

Sigma's vision unit took a direct hit. The image feed went black. Beta-Phi stayed for every last agonising second, until, with a jagged burst of electronically mediated pain, it was done.

Disconnecting himself from the dead data-beam, Beta-Phi began the prayer of Untimely Deactivation. He was partway into the fourteenth stanza when the voice of the vile Polux interrupted him. Beta-Phi hated this flesh-weapon that sacrificed artefacts far more precious and irreplaceable than he, all because of false value attribution. Polux was a mass-produced device, Sigma ancient and precious. His life was worth less than the automaton's by a long measure.

'Datasmith. I honour and acknowledge your sacrifice.'

Beta-Phi did not respond. He snubbed the Imperial Fist, leaving his ocular sensors deliberately inactive and refusing to look at him.

Polux paused – selecting the most context-appropriate platitude to placate Beta-Phi's anger, thought Beta-Phi. He would not be mollified. He shuffled around a little in his data throne, turned the mechanisms bonded to his spine upon the Space Marine. Polux was not dissuaded.

'The ruse worked. Your machine bought us a great deal of time. Our preparations are complete, and I for one wish I could be there when the Night Lords see what they have been fighting for so ruinously.'

An encoded particle stream of satisfaction thundered along the logic gates of Beta-Phi's neural enhancements. What Polux said next snuffed it out, and his heart hardened anew.

'Withdraw your other unit. This battle is not over, and it is required elsewhere.'

Skraivok clambered over the sparking remains of the construct. The bracing field's generator had been hit in the fight by a stray shot, and it smoked in ruin. Past that, darkness his eyes could not penetrate welcomed him.

Very few conditions of blackness were unclear to Nostramans. Their night vision was second to none. Enhanced by Space Marine augmentation and the systems of power armour, no one could see further or clearer in poor conditions than a Night Lord. That Skraivok could not see was cause for grave concern. His pistol primed, Skraivok advanced carefully. A mess of loose rock made footing hazardous.

The reason he could not see was right before him, only he had been looking at it wrongly. The tunnel was a blind cave. The passageway went thirty metres before narrowing to a tube as wide as his fist and disappearing into the mountain. The darkness was not the absence of light in an open space, but a glossy black wall. The stone was like nothing he had ever seen, smooth and black and light absorbent.

He walked to it, and ran his fingers lightly over the surface.

The ground quaked with distant explosions. Skraivok closed his eyes. Demolition charges, there was no mistaking detonations so closely spaced. Several seconds after the blasts displaced air puffed into the back of the cave. Forced through so narrow an aperture, it made a low and sorry hooting, a mockery of a victory fanfare.

Skraivok slammed his armoured palm against the stone. 'Oh for–'

'Captain? Claw master?'

'Gallivar.' Skraivok turned around to see his battered company officers crowding the entrance. There were fewer than there had been three hours ago.

'The other construct has retreated. I have numerous reports of landslides all over the mountain. They enemy have blocked the caves everywhere.'

'All of them?'

Gallivar was silent a moment, scanning through the reports coming in from all over the slopes. 'Negative, my lord, some remain open.'

'Like this one, I'll warrant. Blind alleys.'

Skraivok’s fingers scraped over the stone. He pressed hard. The rock scratched the paint away from his fingertips to reveal the dull gleam of ceramite beneath, but remained unmarked itself. ‘Someone in there knows what they are doing.’

TWENTY

In defence of the mountain
Irregulars
Arkus

Mericus motioned to Hasquin. The bigger man moved through the thick vegetation soundlessly.

‘You’re our best tracker,’ whispered Mericus. ‘Someone’s been through here recently, am I right?’

Hasquin nodded. He moved his hand out so very carefully, as if even the air stirring would bring their foes onto them. He indicated darker patches on the quicktree’s pithy sheaths with loose fingers.

‘See that? Contact bruising. They’re good, not bent the trees out of shape.’

‘That’s great,’ said Mericus. ‘So they’re this high up the mountain already?’

A chill wind stirred the quicktrees’ vegetable sleep. Otherwise the forest was silent. No beast nor bird spoke since the Night Lords had arrived.

‘What shall we do, sarge? Vox it in?’

‘That’d bring them down on us real quick. Question is, is this information worth the risk? It’s probably a party out scouting for the assault gathering at the mountain’s feet.’

‘We could send Martinus out again. He’s the quickest runner.’

‘He’s not holding up too well,’ said Mericus. ‘Not since Aelius was taken. Send Pontian, he’s–’

Something round and cold and hollow pressed against the side of his neck.

‘Don’t move,’ said a voice. There was an odd quality to it; transhumanly deep, but not quite like the voice of a Space Marine.

Mericus twisted around. The barrel of the boltgun slid around his neck. A broad face looked back at him. Thick war-paint striped it various shades of Sothan green. The colour made him look fierce, but on closer inspection the face was also less than a man’s. A boy’s face, distorted by arcane science.

‘Oberdeii?’ said Mericus. He put his hand on the square block of the bolter.

‘Mericus?’

Mericus stood up. Hasquin had his hands in the air. Three young Ultramarines resolved themselves out of the greenery, like figures hidden in an optical illusion suddenly revealed.

Mericus recognised them all. The Scouts had been familiar sights in Sothopolis, sent out

to help the colonists as part of their normalisation training or somesuch. He smiled in relief.

'I thought we were dead there!' he said.

'You almost were,' said Solon. Mericus remembered him being particularly humorless.

'Where's your sergeant?'

'Hurt,' said Oberdeii.

The boys looked at each other uneasily. 'Boys' didn't cover what they were. They were taller than Mericus, and massively muscled, but he lacked a suitable alternative term.

'We're heading for the Emperor's Watch, but we can't move fast with him,' said Oberdeii.

Mericus frowned. 'Come in by the tunnels.'

'Not safe,' said Oberdeii, and Mericus sensed a deeper reluctance behind his words. 'We came down last night, crashed. You?' said Oberdeii.

'The mountain is holding out. We're not much good in the tunnels. The Night Lords would kill us in a second, so we're sent out to scout.'

'We're nothing but something to trip over,' said Hasquin frustratedly.

'So we keep an eye out for infiltration teams. We drop the occasional ambush, when we can,' said Mericus.

'You've killed some of them?' said Solon incredulously.

Mericus nodded. 'A few. Look, you better come back with us. My men are resting up nearby in an old herder's hide. You'd be much better off inside the mountain.'

'We were going to help the civilians,' said Solon. He gave Oberdeii a dark look. 'But our acting-sergeant changed his mind.'

'We had to keep Arkus safe,' said Oberdeii. 'Missions change.'

'Arkus is your sergeant?'

The youths nodded.

'I am in charge until he recovers,' said Oberdeii.

'He's been down since the invasion began?'

'He'll make it,' said Oberdeii aggressively. That told Mericus everything he needed to know. Mericus was sympathetic to the youth. Space Marines were not indestructible, either in body or mind. Losing their mentor would be hard.

'Is he far?'

'Not far,' said Oberdeii. 'He's with Tebecai.'

'Let's go and get him then. Then you should come back with us. There are a number of your own in the mountain. You can rejoin them.'

‘They’re not all dead?’ said the third. Mericus didn’t know him so well. Tolomachus, that was his name.

‘They’re not all dead.’

The young recruits grinned with relief at one another. Their demeanour changed. Guns that had been pointing at Mericus and Hasquin suddenly were not.

‘Finally,’ said Solon. ‘Unless you’re going to give us another reason to stay out of the Pharos, brother.’

Oberdeii glared at him.

‘Hasquin, I reckon you can put your hands down now. Lads, we should go.’

‘First we must get our sergeant, and Tebecai,’ said Oberdeii.

Mericus looked upwards through the crowding fronds of the trees. ‘All right, but we need to be quick. It’s getting late.’

The Sothans’ camp was noiseless. They communicated by glance and gesture. When Mericus and Hasquin led the Scouts through the narrow, vegetation-choked entrance and inside, many eyes followed them, but nobody spoke.

A cascade of swiftvine hid the gap in the rock. The plants obligingly rewove themselves into a thick mat at night, making the hideout practically impossible to see from outside.

Inside, the cave opened up into a long chamber that ended in an abrupt dead end. The ceiling became lower and lower, until the far end terminated in a shallow curve barely half the height of a man. Unusually, the cave had part-filled. If there was a tube leading into the mountain as there was in most of these seeming cul-de-sacs, it had been buried by the drift of packed soil and leaf mould that made up the floor. The air in the cave was blue with woodsmoke from the one small fire they allowed themselves. As the green light from the entrance was limited, the endless twilight of the underworld reigned within.

Mericus had the boys bring their sergeant to the back of the cave, where the Sothans’ field medicae Kerit had a small station upon a not-quite-level shelf of black rock. A limited collection of bandages and other medical supplies was neatly arrayed at its head. He eyed Mericus with a mixture of amazement and extreme annoyance as the giant Arkus was laid down by his charges.

Kerit jerked his head meaningfully toward the cave mouth.

‘You better wait by the entrance,’ Mericus told the Scouts.

They were reluctant to go, but Tebecai understood, and gently coaxed them away from the medicae station.

‘I will stay,’ said Oberdeii.

Mericus put his hands on the Space Marine’s huge shoulders.

‘Let Kerit do his work, Oberdeii. I’ll come and get you when he’s had a look, all right?’

Oberdeii stared over Mericus’ head to where Arkus lay. Mericus thought the Scout was

past hearing his words, or perhaps deliberately ignoring him. But he turned without a word and went to join his brothers. Mericus watched them gather by the slit leading outside. Demethon approached them with a canteen of water and a handful of field rations. After a pause they accepted them, and Mericus went back to the medicae.

Kerit stared at the giant body, as if he had no idea what manner of creature the sergeant was. His bier filled the rock shelf.

'Is he dead?' asked Mericus softly.

'Not quite. He's gone into suspension.'

'They can do that?'

'They can do that. When they are injured.'

'How?' said Mericus.

Kerit rounded on him. 'How by all the Illyrian hells should I know? Damn it, Mericus, I'm not even a proper medicae! The best I'm for is fixing the broken legs on quarians.' He looked hopelessly at the wounded Space Marine. 'I wish I never said I knew a little healing. I'd be happier with a lasgun. Men are hard enough, but this is well beyond me. He's a legionary, Mericus. What do I know about that? I don't even know where to start! He's as big as a phantine and in there…' He pointed at the black wound in Arkus' side. 'What's in there is barely human.'

Mericus glanced at the Scouts. 'Keep it down, Kerit, you forget how fine their ears are. Can you fix him?'

'He's suffered massive internal trauma…' Kerit shook his head. 'Honestly, it looks like he took a hit from a lascannon. There's nothing I can do.'

'Apparently, he did take a hit from a lascannon.'

Kerit leaned on the rock shelf. He closed his eyes. In the gloom of the cave his fatigue-pale skin was ghostly. 'Well. That explains a lot. For the time being, his body is compensating. If I could get him to a Legion Apothecary, they might fix him up, but up here? He's on a slow road to the underworld. He's got a day, maybe, at best.'

'Is there an Apothecary in the mountain?'

'One, I think. But this level of injury is beyond the facilities there. If they still held the castellum there might be a chance, but the move would probably kill him anyway. I'm sorry, Mericus. It's astounding he's lasted this long. His time's up. There's nothing I can do.'

'What do we tell the boys?'

Kerit wiped his hands on a filthy towel and threw it down. 'They're not boys, Mericus. They might look a little like it, but they're not. They're Space Marines. There's only one thing you can tell them.' Kerit lifted eyes made bleary and red by lack of sleep and woodsmoke. 'The truth.' Clearly Kerit didn't want to be the man to deliver it.

The Scouts huddled together, attention directed to where their surrogate father lay. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Thank you. It’s for the best. When are we returning? The men are close to exhaustion.’

‘This evening. There’s been no sign of the enemy up here for hours, but that might have more to do with the Scouts than with us.’

Mericus went to deliver the bad news. They could tell what he was going to say. There was shocked silence, disbelief.

‘We’re going back up the mountain later,’ he told them.

‘We should carry on fighting,’ said Tolomachus. ‘There’s no time to rest.’

‘If we could get Arkus into the mountain, the Apothecary there might help him,’ said Tebecai.

‘Who is it?’ asked Solon.

‘An Imperial Fist, one of the Lightkeepers. I don’t know him.’

‘Oberdeii? What’s your decision?’ asked Mericus.

Oberdeii shifted his bolter uncomfortably. Everyone in the cave was staring at him.

‘Oberdeii? You’re in command,’ said Mericus.

‘All right, all right.’ Oberdeii looked upwards in the direction of the peak beyond the walls. ‘We go up. We will follow Sergeant Mericus and his men.’

Arkus died before they got to the top of the mountain. Mericus was not sure if the Scouts noticed when he passed or if they just carried on, bearing their leader in silence.

Only when they came to the entrance to the Pharos caves did the young Ultramarines set Arkus down, stand around him and bow their heads. Their actions displayed a dignity that deeply moved Mericus.

Gate A, as the cave was dubbed, hid in a cracked landscape where the crags of the mountain broke downwards into the upper woods. The treeline was a couple of hundred metres higher still, and by the cave the quicktrees grew tall enough to mask their presence.

From outside, the cavern looked deserted; inside it was anything but. Warriors in the yellow of Dorn’s Imperial Fists held the way. Two rough pillboxes made of field stones expertly fitted together guarded the entrance on the inside, manned by Ultramarines in battered armour. In the middle of the entrance, calm as a man who awaits guests on his porch, stood a giant. His golden-yellow armour was bright and clean enough for the parade ground. Upon one arm was a huge shield, while the other was clad in a massive power fist underslung with a meltagun. Implacable, immovable as Mount Pharos himself, Polux was the keeper of the mountain.

‘Captain Polux,’ said Mericus. ‘You are spoiling us with this welcome.’

‘I came to see for myself the damage the traitors are doing to your world,’ said Polux. ‘How went your patrol, sergeant? I see from the smoke they are burning the lower parts of

the forest.' He looked past Mericus and his ragged band of Sothans to the young Ultramarines bringing up the rear, but did not ask directly of them, not yet. Polux liked to hear what his men had to say for themselves. 'Report.'

Mericus gave a lazy salute. He was incredibly tired, his lungs burning with the altitude.

'The Night Lords are massing at multiple points all round the base of the mountain below our sector. I imagine it is the same elsewhere.'

Polux nodded. 'They gather for another attack. We shall be ready for them.'

'I'm sure you will. I, on the other hand, am about ready to drop. My men need rest, as much as you can give. Please, we've not slept for nearly forty-eight hours,' he added. 'We're not like you. If only we were.'

'If you were, then I might not trust you. Honour is in short supply among the Legions. You do your part well, sergeant.'

Mericus scratched his hair. It was unkempt, full of soil and twigs and the old gods alone knew what else. 'Thanks. But a good sleep would be better than gratitude. Any word from the rest of our boys?'

'Your comrades returned an hour ago.'

'That news is better than a rest. Although,' he added hurriedly. 'I will still take the rest.'

'Who are these others?' Polux asked.

'Scouts. Found them on the mountain.' Mericus waved Oberdeii forward. 'Acting-Sergeant Oberdeii, meet Captain Alexis Polux of the Imperial Fists. He's in charge. I'll let you two get to know each other. I'll just be over here should you need me, slowly dying.'

Without waiting to be dismissed Mericus went to the side of the cave entrance. There he placed his back against the smoothness of the alien stone and slid down until he was sitting on the floor. The remnants of his squad joined him and wearily slumped down beside him. He had only nine men, a mix from all the squads. Vitellius had a few more; the rest were dead. That was the way the universe rolled the dice. Sergeant Bolarion had been overjoyed that his family had survived, only to be blown to pieces a few hours later. Someone somewhere was having a good laugh at Mericus' expense.

'Life is a crappy business,' said Mericus to himself.

'Sarge?'

'Nothing, Tiny.' Mericus watched the giant Imperial Fist talk to the Scouts. He found Polux as stony as he did intimidating. The captain's lack of human feelings beyond anger, rectitude and honour grated on his easy-going nature, but there was something melancholy to him also: sorrow at the war in part certainly, and something more. Mericus was an excellent judge of character, and he couldn't shake the feeling that Polux thought himself unworthy. *There is a connection between us,* he thought, *though we hide it differently. If we talked more, we would understand each other.*

The Scouts saluted the Imperial Fist, and went inside. Polux beckoned Mericus. With

supreme effort, he stood.

‘It is not an easy thing for a neophyte to lose his master. These Scouts have done well.’

‘Perhaps you should say that to them.’

‘There is no need. They are Space Marines, they will understand.’

‘Perhaps you should anyway,’ said Mericus. ‘They’re only young.’

‘And why do you think I did not?’ said Polux. A little strain entered his voice. ‘I have welcomed them into our company. They will fight alongside your men from now on.’

Mericus’ eyes widened. ‘That I didn’t expect.’

‘Are you going to start babbling on about the honour and so forth, Mericus?’

‘Well, no. Hang on, are you teasing me?’

‘About the honour, yes I am,’ said Polux. ‘I am not completely humourless. But not about your co-operation. These Ultramarines are not fully formed. They will not last long in the tunnels. That is close work, for which their armour is insufficient.’

‘Then scavenge them some – they’ll be more use to you than I’ll be to them.’

‘They cannot bear battleplate, not yet. Their transition is incomplete, they have not taken their carapaces. Without them, our armour is useless. But they are good Scouts. Like you and your shepherds, they can move through the terrain undetected. They have spent half their lives here. They are almost as Sothan as you.’

‘I’m not a Sothan,’ said Mericus quietly. His neck hurt from craning, so he dropped his eyes from Polux’s face. The Imperial Fist was huge; Mericus came only to the rims of his shoulder guards.

‘Your men would disagree, Mericus. You carry yourself around us as if you believe you are of no consequence. That is not true. You are a little man in stature compared to I, but your deeds are far bigger than you appreciate. More than one of us already owes you a debt of honour.’ Polux raised his massive gauntlet in salute. ‘Go to your rest. You will be leaving again in four hours.’

Mericus gathered his weary crew about him. He nodded to Sergeant Solus manning the inner defences, and stepped into the welcome cool of the Pharos.

Behind him, Alexis Polux looked out from his eyrie over the green folds of the mountain at the columns of smoke billowing skyward. For the time being, all was quiet.

That would not last.

TWENTY-ONE

A murder of crows
Sacrifice
Double-edged gift

The second day of the invasion was coming to a close when the lords of night held conclave.

‘Would anyone perhaps care to tell me why, when we are twenty thousand fine killers in number, we cannot take one small mountain off a handful of Guilliman’s brigade of public officials?’

Krukesh swept his sword down, shattering the top of the table hololith into square shards of black glass. The rotating image of Mount Pharos fizzed and popped out of existence.

‘If only it were so easy,’ said Claw Master Benthen Gesh. He spoke behind his hand, but intended that everyone hear.

‘You do realise, Gesh, that every hour we are here brings us closer to defeat? The Ultramarines will be on their way here. Roboute Guilliman has a mind like an abacus, but even he shall be able to see, once he has exhausted every tedious line of logical deduction, that we are the totality of the threat, that there is no realm-wide invasion coming. Once he realises that there is only our force, he will come down on this planet waxing wrathful. He has a reputation for weakling mercy, but I am sure even his refined sense of justice will not stop him putting your head upon a pike when he gets here.’

‘Then I ask, claw lord, why are we engaged in this offensive at all?’ said Gesh, who was not a warrior to be easily cowed by anyone, least of all Krukesh. ‘We have taken an excess of casualties. It is all well to sneer at the wardens of Ultramar as slaves to base humanity, but they fight boldly. That is why we do not have their mountain.’

Krukesh leaned on the wreck of the table. ‘I would take care not to address me again in that manner, claw master.’

‘Of course, claw lord,’ Gesh said snidely.

‘We are here because that beacon offers the Ultramarines something. And I want it. Who knows what else it does? It is not only a light in the sky.’

Skraivok snorted.

‘Do you find something funny, Skraivok?’ said Krukesh. The claw lord fixed him with his doleful black eyes.

‘No, my lord. A recalled irony. That is all.’

‘If you would be so good as to return your attention to the matter at hand?’

Skraivok bowed sharply. The enmity Krukesh had for him radiated ever stronger. He could not fathom why he had attracted such opprobrium from the claw lord, and in light of

that it was an even greater mystery why Krukesh had rescued him in the first place. Both questions vexed Skraivok greatly. No answer could be found, a regrettable state of affairs that seemed to be his lot of late.

'The Ultramarines are led by Polux of the Fists, and his pet warsmith. Their expertise in siegecraft is evident in what they have achieved.' Skraivok activated a subsidiary hololith projector. A smaller version of the mountain was called into being. 'These cave mouths have been blocked by engineered rockfalls. I suspect that many of them are blinds. We are attempting deep auspex, but the beacon throws off virtually all our scans. You saw what happened when your fleet arrived to our rendezvous and they ignited the beacon permanently, my lord.'

A sneer was all the acknowledgement Skraivok received. The initial lighting of the Pharos had sent out an electromagnetic pulse so far into the void that it had affected their ships right on the edge of the system. 'They have retained several entrances, but these are small and in inaccessible areas, easily held by a small number against a far larger force.'

'Our force, you mean,' said Grukeer the Vile, captain of the 89th. 'A force that is getting rapidly smaller.'

'Let the man speak!' said Gesh wearily. 'I am in no hurry for another assault, but time is wasting.'

'They are also sallying out. Our scouting parties are continuously harried.'

'Define "harried" for me, Skraivok,' said Krukesh acidly.

'More of our long-range patrols to the upper mountain or into the caves do not come back than do,' said Skraivok simply. 'That is what I mean by harried.'

'Have we a better idea of their numbers?' said Jufeener Paladan, of the 19th.

Gesh spoke again. 'Not really. If we assume a full company split between the platform and the castellum, a hundred or so might have escaped into the mountain. There is also the Mechanicum contingent, but that is pathetically small, and not of the Taghmata. Some small number of mortal troops, but they are negligible in effectiveness. Perhaps half the civilian population also fled into the caves. We have not found them. I myself have come up against Legionaries of the Imperial Fists. And there are also some indications of mixed squads of other Legions loyal to the False Emperor?' He asked this of Varakesh, a brutish captain whose face was a knotted mess of plasma burn scars.

Varakesh nodded. 'Token numbers, nothing more.'

'Now, if we assume no more than two hundred legionaries, and perhaps a dozen Mechanicum constructs, perhaps the same amount of auxiliaries…' Gesh tapped at the hololith's control slab. Orange glowed at various points on the mountainside. 'These are the entrances to the mountain that we know of. This is the optimal tactical disposition, but of course we do not know which of these are true entrances, and which are decoys. Nor do we have any idea of the internal layout of the mountain.'

'What did the captives say?' said Krukesh.

‘That the mountain is honeycombed by endless caverns,’ said Gesh. ‘None have ever been far inside. Superstitions, and simple fear of being lost. Further to that, Guilliman enacted an order barring access to the mountain over a century ago. Images, writing, even drawings of the mountain were prohibited by decree, so I can say, well…’

‘None of them know anything,’ concluded Krukesh for him.

‘No matter how hard they were questioned, no, my lord,’ conceded Gesh. ‘They speak of light burning from the caves at dawn and dusk, and strange dreams that affect all on this world. These are not natural phenomena. The mountain is probably a device. I surmise it was discovered here, not built by the Primarch Guilliman. It is old, this thing.’

‘This fortress atop the mountain is keeping our air support away,’ said Skraivok. He pointed to the Emperor’s Watch. ‘A concerted orbital beam strike should bring it down. If we were to destroy it, we might be better placed to land directly upon the slopes or upon this promontory here, but they have been firing anti-ship missiles from the cavities, so I would not assume easy success even should we destroy the fort.’

‘There is to be no heavy fire upon the mountain,’ said Krukesh. ‘We have no idea what equipment might be housed in that fort. We could destroy what we have come to take for our own.’

‘The enemy themselves brought down large parts of the mountainside,’ pointed out Paladan.

‘All rock, none of the glass tunnels, so far as we can ascertain,’ said Gesh.

‘They have the advantage of familiarity,’ said Krukesh. ‘They are in a position to know which pieces can be safely broken, while we are not. How are the pattern testers for teleport assault faring?’

‘Poorly, my lord,’ said Hakar of the Deep, captain of the 104th, with a surly tone. A teleport assault on the main chamber would bring the battle to a swift close. Upon his efforts depended the lives of his brothers, and they were not backward in reminding him of it. ‘The mountain is impermeable to every kind of probe we can conduct. Our forge serfs and Mechanicum allies repeatedly attempt a lock upon the chamber we are sure is at the peak by the funicular terminus. But whenever we scan the mountain, any part of it, it is as if there is nothing there.’

‘There must be something,’ growled Krukesh.

‘We cannot see it. Our astropaths can do no better,’ said Hakar apologetically. ‘The mountain is unreadable, a spatial and psychic blank.’

‘Warpcraft?’

‘It is something else,’ said Hakar.

Krukesh looked at his underlings in turn. They returned his regard with almost as much contempt. Skraivok hid his glee. Krukesh was taxing what fragile unity he had brought with him with this attack. It was becoming clear curiosity and ambition rather than necessity drove his strategy to take the mountain. The Night Lords were no strangers to

the shedding of blood. They enjoyed it immensely, providing, of course, it was the blood of strangers. Spilling their own so freely was not to their liking, and for the last day they had been bleeding heavily.

'We will continue with my plan. We shall assault all the entrances simultaneously,' said Krukesh. 'They cannot defend all of them equally. That way we shall break them.'

'They can defend some of them very well, my lord,' said Gesh dryly.

'You are warriors,' shouted Krukesh. 'Some of you will die, but we will prevail. Is that not the prosecution of war?'

'Rather a lot of us will die,' corrected Gesh. 'And not all of us are comfortable with that. This beacon is important, that is clear to us all. We should smash it, now, before we are overwhelmed in counter-attack.'

'Are you disobeying me, Gesh?' said Krukesh. Two Atramentar came into the command tent, summoned wordlessly by Krukesh from outside. They stood at his shoulders, the helm lenses of their massive Terminator war-suits fixed upon Gesh. Heat washed off their power plants, the thin skin of their energy fields glowed with residual radioactivity. 'Draw up your plans. Submit them for my approval tomorrow by nightfall. We attack by darkness. Tread carefully, Gesh, you can be replaced.'

'As can you,' Gesh muttered darkly. He stalked out of the room. Three of the sixteen captains present went with him. More pointedly looked away from him at this display of defiance. Skraivok stayed rooted to his place. *Ever the loyal servant,* he thought bitterly.

'In the alternative, any one of you who finds a way into that mountain will be richly rewarded,' Krukesh said. 'Now go! About your business!'

With many a sharp look at Hakar, the claw masters of the Night Lords filed out. Not one spoke, either to their fellows or to their commander. The air was heavy with intrigue.

Now this, thought Skraivok as he followed them out into Sotha's sultry evening, *is getting interesting.*

Skraivok made his way back through the camp to his own command. Day retreated. Sunlight filtered through the Ruinstorm stained everything a deep red. Vehicle exhaust tainted the air, and draughts of fierce heat wafted out everywhere from power units and engines.

They were doing this properly, the old way, their camp a temporary city constructed to methods older than the Great Crusade. Modular barracks stood in neat rows, thrown up in the space of hours by dedicated serf teams. Each company's sub-camp centred on its armoury buildings. A defensive wall of prefabricated sections defined its edge. The grid pattern of Sothopolis helped. How kind of the Ultramarines it had been to leave most of their city as bare lots. There had been no need to prepare the ground. All they had done was knock down a few fences, and everything was ready for them to move in.

The Night Lords had laid out a landing zone at the very centre, abuzz with the comings and goings of small craft. A line of lights in the sky delimited the stacked flightpaths of

the vehicles bringing more equipment down to the spaceport. Heavy trucks rumbled in and out of the four gates. The camp had all been planned and laid out with customary Space Marine efficiency, although not many Legions would have cared for the Night Lords' decorations.

Crucified, skinless civilians, some still clinging to agonised life, were arrayed around the perimeter on metal crosses. It reminded Skraivok very much of past compliances, Cheraut in particular. On seeing this perhaps the Lord of Macragge would regret the humbling of Curze by his brother Dorn.

A deep pang of nostalgia surprised him. He fought against it. He had no sympathy for the Emperor's wars, not any more. The Night Lords had done their duty, and been looked at askance for the methods the Emperor had ordered them to use. Always they had been regarded as villains of the blackest degree, even though their terror tactics preserved far more lives than the cleaner warfare of other Legions. As monsters was how they were seen, and so monsters were what they had become.

As Curze had always told them, they could not escape their nature. They had always known who they were.

Skraivok steadfastly ignored how, as time passed, the newer recruits from Nostramo revelled in the carnage and did not see it as a grim duty. He tried not to remember when things were different, when atrocity was performed for a higher purpose and not for atrocity's sake.

As Curze had also said, things cannot be any other way than what they are.

He had heard the likes of Kellendvar talking of how the Night Lords were stronger than all the rest, that they would go forth, cast down the lying Emperor and live as princes among men.

As he smelled the burning flesh, the stink of blood and fear-voided bowels, he knew in his hearts that could never be. They were monsters. He was a monster. How odd to view oneself so; no man ever sets out to be a monster, and yet here he was. Monstrous.

Things cannot be any other way.

Skraivok passed into the square grouping of his company barracks. The full complement of buildings had been erected, because that was the way things were done. Never mind that only half the racks would ever be occupied in those brief hours the Space Marines slept. Screams came from one of the vacant barracks, followed by ugly laughter. Part of him wanted to go in and see what was happening, to partake of the entertainment. Another part of him was sickened, a part that grew weaker by the day.

I am tired, he thought. His quarters had been erected and awaited, a modular building half the size of the barracks. The banners of his company flapped outside.

The doors recognised him and opened. He stepped into the cleansing room, where warm water hosed down his armour from every angle. Still dripping, he went into his arming chamber. There four silent servitors removed his armour. Skraivok had not had an equerry for a long time; there was no one he trusted enough.

Dressed in simple robes, he went into his personal chamber, a large enough space scented by three braziers of lazily smoking incense. Metal floors were cold under his feet.

His serfs were frightened of him enough not to be a danger. They scurried about, forever on the edge of terror, fetching him food and drink. Some of it was simple stuff taken from the silos of the conquered. It was a pleasure to eat after so long consuming the *Umber Prince*'s emergency rations.

Sensing him satisfied, his serfs withdrew to whatever hovels they occupied in the slave camp outside the walls. Skraivok called up the *Umber Prince* to grill Shipmaster Hrantax about the progress of the repairs. He baited his servant, but was mostly pleased by his progress. The orbital facilities the Ultramarines had were modest, but far better than nothing. There was a pile of data-slates on his desk, fresh orders and casualty reports. They could wait. He prepared to retire, for he had had no natural sleep for days. He remembered his days as a youngster, those times of revels when the halls of his ancestral home were full of adults, every one a danger to him. The last week had been like that, constantly on his guard.

'Even monsters need to sleep,' he said to himself.

A low chuckle had him spinning round. A horrible noise, guttural and feline, as much full of pain as amusement. Skraivok had fought his share of xenos over the centuries. This laugh was unlike any other he had ever heard. It was not human, and it was not alien.

Inhuman, that was the word.

His hand went for a weapon that was not there. Then his fist clenched, and anger took control.

'Berenon! What are you doing in here? I did not hear you enter.'

The Librarian stood behind a brazier of glowing incense coals. His face was in shadow, and he stood awkwardly, his knees twisted sideways. He leaned against the wall for support.

'You did not hear me enter,' said Berenon. His voice was affected in some way, deep and raspy, the suggestion of the same feline growling beneath it.

'Are you injured?' said Skraivok.

'No,' said the Librarian.

'What is it, Berenon? If you bring me any other news than a way into the mountain, you can go away.'

'I bring you an offer. Hear it out, lord of the night.' Berenon drew in a long, difficult breath, and stepped into the light. His left foot dragged on the floor, his hand disturbed the hangings on the walls.

The Librarian lifted his head, and he smiled, an expression the miserable man was not known to employ. Not his expression at all, Skraivok realised with shock. Berenon's face was slack and sickly grey. Ropes of drool ran from twitching lips. The eyes in that morbid

flesh were changed, red orbs shot through with gold, with no discernible pupil, and they flicked tremblingly back and forth.

'Gendor Skraivok!'

The voice was not the Librarian's. The movement of his lips did not match the words. Skraivok had the awful sensation that it was the eyes that spoke, and not Berenon.

Skraivok moved behind his desk, snatching up the boltgun resting in a stand beside it. He levelled it at the creature in front of him. It made no move on him, and he held his fire.

'You are not Berenon.'

The thing ran a long pink tongue over its teeth. These were Berenon's own flat, grey human teeth one moment, the sharp translucent needles of an aquatic predator the next. Berenon's mouth moaned.

'You are astute. I borrow his flesh. A fine mind this one, strong and wilful. But the walls of the world are thin, and he has lost his way. It is not easy to talk to you so, but possible, yes. Possible.'

'I have heard of members of the Seventeenth Legion who let the things of the warp into their flesh, to become their slaves. Are you such as they?'

'Yes and no. I am less and yet greater. I need no permission. Erebus' storm opens the way for the likes of me. Such a time this is! When our worlds might meet and freely intermingle.'

'If you seek worship you will not find it. We are stronger than the others.'

'You are haughty. You are… **deluded…'** The last word came out as a long, drawn-out hiss.

'We are not Lorgar's monks. We will not bend our knee to you. You will find no worship here!' shouted Skraivok. He waited for a response to his shouting, but sound in the room had taken on a dead quality, and he knew he could count on no help from elsewhere.

'All will bend their knee to the lords of the warp. You think you are strong, but you are weak. You are of flesh. All things made of dirt and fire are feeble before the power of Chaos.'

'Come closer and I will show you how weak I am.'

'You think yourself strong, like your master? I have had the measure of him, who fought with me in the realms of thought. He thinks me bested where I am not. At this moment he runs hither and thither upon the dustball of Macragge, pursuing errands not his own.'

'Curze? Our lord is on Macragge?'

'You call him lord still, this creature that would destroy you to sate his petty desires. Is he worthy of your fealty? You are not strong, Gendor Skraivok, but I can make you strong. I bring offer of alliance. Utilise what you may to our mutual advantage, for is

that not the rule of the strong?'

'I do not care for your conversation,' said Skraivok. He lifted his bolter higher.

'Hear me out. There is power in this shell, and it burns quickly. Send me back or watch me go and you will never benefit. I come to give aid only to the worthy.'

'You are speaking to me.' Skraivok's palms were sweating. The presence of the thing inside his Librarian mentally pained him, a terrible pressure crawled at the back of his skull. Spots swam in front of his eyes. Phantom smells troubled him, no less so for their fleeting presence.

'Your ambition is a blaze, your cynicism sweet wine. You are an acquired taste, Gendor Skraivok the Painted Count, but one that delights my palate. You are worthy. Together, you and I can realise your desire.' Again that slender tongue licked teeth that were first one form and then another.

'You offer me power, yet you require my help. You do not seem so powerful.'

'This lighthouse is a thing of our ancient foe. It is a feeble candle against the inferno of the storm, but I see further. The storm will pass as all storms do. The beacon must be destroyed, or it shall one day be used as a weapon against us as it once was in aeons past.' The creature laughed again. Berenon's body convulsed with the effort of it hard enough to crack his ribs. Red tinted the saliva that ran from his mouth. ***'They tried so hard to best us, but where are they now?'***

'I do not know to whom you refer.'

'Be thankful you do not. This great struggle of yours is but the latest skirmish in a war that has gone on since time began. Look fully upon me! See how my essence reworks the flesh of your comrade at my will. Am I not majestic? Am I not terrible?' Berenon shuffled from the wall and stood tall. Then he crouched and wagged a finger at Skraivok. ***'But there are worse things in this lifeless realm of yours than a humble interloper such as myself.'***

'Our objective is to take the Pharos,' said Skraivok. 'I will not profit from its destruction.'

'What I speak of will come in years beyond reckoning. It shall be yours while you need it. Think, Gendor Skraivok! Your own leader despises you. He has promised reward to the one who leads him within. You cannot project your forms of caged energy through the realm of thought. The entropic light of the beacon interferes with your technology, it prevents your passage through the warp. I can bypass it.'

'You speak of the Atramentar?'

The creature snarled. When it was done, half of Berenon's face remained locked in the expression, the other half sagged awfully. There was a palpable heat coming from the Librarian. Wisps of steam leaked out around his collar seal, and the veins on his neck stood out. ***'Yes, yes – dead things, dead meat, clothed in dead metal. This reality is so crude. I shall guide your feeble manipulations of dead matter through the realm of the***

empyrean.'

'I know only a little of your kind. Legends and old stories. What I do know tells me not to trust you.'

'Hearken, and you shall know more! I saw Nostramo. I have walked the dark dreams of the children who cowered there. We are always alongside you, whether you deny us or not, and only ever a nightmare away.'

'The legends are true, and the old stories seem not to be stories,' said Skraivok, ignoring the daemon's hyperbole. 'If there is any wisdom in these… fairytales, all of them are clear on one point. There is always a cost for the favours of beings such as yourself.'

'Naturally,' said the creature. ***'Service without payment is slavery. I am slave of no man, nor ever shall be.'*** Berenon's body jerked as its puppeteer pulled on unseen strings. His back arched so hard that were he not wearing his full plate, his back would have surely broken.

'Tell me your price, daemon, or begone. What do you want? My soul? A vial of child's tears?'

'Nothing so esoteric. I desire… ingress,' hissed the daemon. ***'Let me through, and we shall work towards each other's aims. Deny me, and in four days you shall be dead. My kind are not bound by time. I have seen it, Gendor Skraivok, as surely as I see you here.'***

'Krukesh,' said Skraivok.

'Frustrated by your failures and provoked by the one called Gesh, he will make an example of you, in the singular manner of your Legion. He will fail here, driven off by the Avenging Son of the thrice-cursed Emperor of Terra. He is coming already. The storm will slow him, but it is only a matter of time. Seek within yourself, you know it is true. Your primarch insists that all is fated. Here is a chance to find out if that is true. I give you a choice. Glory and life or…' Red tears of blood ran from its daemonic eyes. ***'… death.'***

They stared at each other, the daemon and the man. As much as Skraivok wanted to unload the clip of his bolter into the possessed Berenon and send his passenger screaming back into the hell of the warp, he did not.

The pressure in Skraivok's head only grew, making it hard to think. 'You swear there is no trick to this?'

'None. You desire to survive. You desire power. You cannot have the second without the first, and I will bring you both. In return, you will help me. I am a soldier of the ages, and I offer a warrior's bargain. That is all.'

Skraivok hesitated. He had never thought to be faced with a choice such as this.

Smoke boiled out of the Librarian's neck seal now. Perspiration ran down that grey flesh. His jaw gaped and popped, and now the daemon's voice came out of it, and the piscine teeth remained. ***'Quickly! I cannot manifest without your permission. This one swore***

itself to you, body and soul, when it joined your company. Emptily meant, perhaps, but sufficient for our purposes here!'

Skraivok gave a quick, reluctant nod. It was enough for the daemon.

Berenon's face twisted into a terrible smile, too wide for his face, too wide for any face. A foul-smelling wind blew through Skraivok's quarters. His flags and papers fluttered. The coals in the braziers flared brightly, the perfume they gave out swamped by a feculent reek.

'Yesss,' said the daemon. ***'Yesssssss!'***

Berenon's body rose into the air. Lightning, a mockery of the Night Lords livery perhaps, leapt all over his armour, earthing into the metal floor of the room, growing thicker and more frequent until the Librarian appeared to be standing atop a block of writhing electricity.

Berenon's eyes slid closed. Skraivok shielded his own against the radiance, his sensitive retinas seared by the glare as flesh warped under the daemon's influence.

Then the Librarian's eyes opened again, and this time Berenon looked out. His eyes were wild with a terror Skraivok had never thought to see in a Space Marine.

Skraivok squinted through his fingers, against the blinding light.

'Brother?'

'Damn you, Skraivok!' howled the Librarian. 'What have you done? *What have you done?*' Berenon struggled to bring his arms up, but they were chained by lightning. He gritted his teeth, his own teeth again, against the strain. 'Damn you!'

There was a rending groan, the sound of metal under terrible pressure. Berenon ceased struggling and began to scream, his head thrashing backward and forward. The wind grew stronger, the stink it carried became unbearable.

With a wet crack, Berenon's battleplate imploded. Gore fountained from the cracks in his armour and pooled upon the floor as it crumpled into a twisted spike of metal. The lightning dimmed, and the wrecked armour descended, festooned with rags of flesh and gut. The bent tip of it passed into the fluids on the floor, carrying on downward as if there were nothing beneath.

The metal slid away. A few last arcs of lightning skittered over the stilling surface, dancing over lumps of pulped meat.

Skraivok approached, gun ready. Blood and slop were all that was left of his Librarian.

A perfect circle of ripples formed on the blood pool. A round shape emerged. Blood streamed off it so thickly Skraivok could only tell it was the pommel of a sword when the quillons broke the surface. Gore ran down it, but the pool was not replenished – rather it shrank, as if the sword took the mess into itself as it flowed down the metal.

A blade a metre and a half long emerged, tipped with a broad point. The remains of Berenon were sucked away until nothing was left upon the floor. Then the blood ceased to

flow along the surface, and the sword became clean. Gobbets of blood and metal flew from all over the room. They defied the stinking gale, splashed gently onto the blade and were drawn within. Soon there was no sign of what had happened, save a few dents and nicks in the walls and ceiling.

The sword hovered in the air. The blade was of dark steel, the grip bound in black leather, while the fittings of the hilt were a dull brass. It was an altogether plain weapon.

Tomorrow, at noon, the way will be opened. The daemon's voice boomed around the room so loudly Skraivok nearly lost his grip on his weapon with the pain. ***Noon!***

The wind dropped suddenly. The blade fell from the air to the floor with a clatter that rang on for far too long. When it faded a semblance of normalcy returned.

Skraivok shook his head. His ears screamed, his vision trailed the bright afterimages of Berenon's demise, but all was calm. A few of his papers were on the floor. Nothing was amiss. The noises of the camp crept back in from outside.

He went to the sword. Without thinking, he bent to pick it up. As his hand neared the grip he caught an eager whispering far removed from the room. His hair prickled and a chill ran up his spine.

He withdrew his hand sharply. A resolution took hold of him. He would never, ever bear that sword.

Skraivok deactivated the stasis field on one of his trophy cabinets. The weapon within had been won at cost in the service of Terra: a master-crafted kirvani blade that had belonged to their crown prince. Once, it had meant a great deal to him, but no longer. He cast it onto the floor without a thought and called in his servitors. Let them take the daemon sword. They did so with no ill effect, and placed it in the vacant display.

With relief Skraivok snapped on the stasis field.

And then, as his wits gathered themselves and his unease retreated, he had a very fine idea indeed.

TWENTY-TWO

Emperor's flight
Angel of light
Ave Imperator

A day had passed since Guilliman's departure. No word came back through the Ruinstorm. The Pharos field was absent from the chapel. As if in sorrow, Macragge's weather turned sombre, clouds hanging heavy and grey over the Hera's Crown mountains. Autumn was nearly done, and the first taste of winter came on the winds out of the east.

Upon them, too, came an angel and an emperor. Sanguinius clove the sky on broad wings of brilliant white. Roboute Guilliman had suggested with his characteristic lack of charm that Sanguinius not undertake any risky venture; flying was high on that list.

Sanguinius had nodded at the time, feigning agreement while simultaneously having every intention of ignoring his brother's suggestion. Roboute might as well command the eagle to stay earthbound. Flying was as easy as walking to Sanguinius, not that any of the others could appreciate that; easier now, sometimes. When the weather was damp like this his legs ached, the only physical legacy of his horrendous wounding at the hands of the warp-fiend Ka'bandha.

The emotional hurt went far deeper.

He closed his eyes and soared upon the buffeting updraughts of winds diverted skyward by the mountains. Squalls of sky-trapped rain pattered from his feathers. One mighty stroke sent him in a long loop towards the peak of Andromache. The severe beauty of Hera's Falls pouring down from the stone fields were hidden by streamers of white and grey, but he preferred this weather, and not only because it concealed him from his brother-appointed guardians. The switching wind made the flight a challenge, and the chill rain on his flesh was exhilarating.

He wore a simple ceremonial breastplate of gold-plated plasteel cast in the semblance of his muscled torso, and so the rain freely soaked through his robes. A long sword was belted at his side. He could fly with his full battleplate, but it tired him. Besides, to be encased in ceramite and plasteel reminded him of his straitened circumstances; battleplate became a warrior's prison while he could not go to war. In the air he knew a freedom none could take away from him, and he preferred to enjoy it to the full.

Stop flying, indeed! Sanguinius held Roboute in the highest regard. He might even love him, he supposed, in that distant way of long separated brothers, but Roboute had an infuriating faith in organisation above all else, as if all his plans and charts and minutely detailed observations could prepare him for anything. There was a reason their father had chosen Horus over Guilliman, to His own ruination.

Sanguinius thought this even as he knew that he had been higher in their father's order of choice than Roboute. He could not countenance himself in the role. To think of that, he

must consider the possibilities other powers had entertained for him.

The lies and temptations of Kyriss enraged him still. He shouted into the wind, his fists clenched. ‘Never, never, never!’ Beating his wings, he pushed himself higher and higher, far above the clouds and the top of the mountains, up to the uppermost envelope of atmospheric flight. He surfed on roaring jetstreams. The rain froze on his skin. The air there was thin enough to suffocate a normal human being, but the spareness of it gave the Angel only a thrilling burn in his lungs. He looked down upon the curve of Guilliman’s world, cold and as well organised as the mind of its master. On the horizon the atmosphere became so attenuated he should have been able to see the stars and the blackness of space.

There instead was the redness of the storm.

A now familiar image flashed across his mind at the sight of it. *His brother Horus, bloated with unnatural power, standing triumphant over his broken corpse…*

The vision had come to him dozens of times and was always the same, starting with his brother’s changed features, the point of view panning inexorably downwards towards his own dead face. He could not turn away, nor could he halt the sorrow that came with it. This was not his own sight he saw, but through the eyes of someone else. By that time, he was already dead.

How many times he had had the vision, he no longer recalled. The first time he had dismissed it as a bad dream, and so it was. Now it pounded at him with the relentlessness of a truth yet to be.

An angel’s death.

The vision changed. He had seen many different ends during the last months. This one was becoming dominant, clearer and more real as the others faded into obscurity.

This *was* how he would die. He was increasingly sure of it.

And so shall die Guilliman’s dream of a new Imperium…

His mood spoiled, Sanguinius ceased labouring upwards. Any further and the air would not support his wings. Spreading them wide, he plummeted, back towards the peaks protruding from the streaming grey cloud.

He pierced the weather front out over the sea, and Magna Macragge Civitas opened like a child’s holobook, an ordered display of lights picking out straight roads and stern, martial buildings in the gloomy evening. He flew over the capital, smiling to himself at the thought of panicked gunnery crews rushing to deactivate their weapons lest they kill their emperor. An unworthy jape, but it took the edge from his frustration. He wheeled around the city, heading up the mountainsides again, intending a further circuit, but the vox-band on his wrist vibrated. He glanced at the heart-shaped ruby set into the metal. It pulsed redly, a specific rhythm that identified the caller.

Azkaellon.

Sanguinius folded his wings like a stooping hawk, plummeting earthwards at a tremendous rate. The grey faces of the mountains blurred past him. The crowded buildings

of the Fortress of Hera swelled, the statuary and decoration upon the ridges and roof peaks presenting themselves in ranks of stone spears.

He headed for the ramparts near the Sacristy of the Librarius, the blue figures standing guard upon it growing rapidly from miniature proportions to those of warrior godlings.

Sanguinius spread his wings to their fullest extent. The snap of arrested air stopped his descent with delicious suddenness. With a lightness that seemed impossible, Sanguinius alighted upon the battlement. Cool air spilled from his wings as they beat a final time and folded upon his back. The Master of Angels shook his feathers out as he stepped forward. They ruffled, smoothing themselves with the twinges of minute muscles.

Sanguinius shivered. Flight aside, the resettling of his plumage was among the most pleasurable sensations he knew.

When he had been a boy he had preened his wings with his hands, clearing them of dirt and reknitting the barbels together. It had helped him to think, and to come to terms with what he was. Now he had others to perform this duty for him, honoured servants of his Legion. Several of these appeared between the Ultramarines lining the rampart, anticipating his arrival as always. With reverent hands they smoothed down those few feathers that had not settled of their own accord. His pinions took care of themselves, being so large and connected directly to his flight muscles, but his coverts often required attention. He flicked out his wings a little again to allow his servants better access. The feathers arranged to their satisfaction, they draped decorative chains over the closed wrists of his wings.

He waved them away, and they vanished with bows back into the half-light whence they came.

Sanguinius strode past the motionless guardians of Hera, Invictarus Suzereins, the most highly honoured of Guilliman's warriors. The Space Marines were locked rigidly as statues. The banners they held in their hands cracked with a life the legionaries seemed not to possess. A cohort of Praecental Guard jogged past. They snapped crisp salutes to him, their perfect lockstep unaffected. Sanguinius returned the gesture with as much respect as he could muster, masking his irritation behind a solemn face. Guilliman's realm was large by any standard, but it was but a part of a much greater whole, and the circumscribed borders of Imperium Secundus pressed in on him as surely as the walls of a doll's house. Having his brother's soldiers crowding his every step worsened the sense of entrapment.

The Plaza of Attendance was empty of supplicants at this hour. There Guilliman's warriors gave way to the Sanguinary Guard of the Blood Angels Legion, golden statues replacing the blue.

The plaza was a vast stepped pit in the centre of the fortress. The doors to his throne complex were at the far side. More arena than public space, the plaza seemed to him. Despite his stature, he felt small as he crossed it.

This insignificance was in marked contrast to the way it usually made him feel. By day the plaza intensified the claustrophia Sanguinius suffered in his position as emperor.

During the early days of Imperium Secundus, legionaries from all Legions clamoured for his attention. That had settled down as the shattered Legions joined the patchwork ranks of Imperium Secundus' armies. Once the shock of the betrayal was over, they had set themselves upon the business of revenge. They were warriors, after all. But the places of the legionaries had been taken by mortal men and women from all over Guilliman's realm. The business of government was all-consuming, whether one was a figurehead or not. How Roboute managed to administer such a sprawling collection of worlds without losing his temper every ten minutes was beyond him. At those times the plaza was crammed, it seemed very small indeed.

Not all of the supplicants came there for reasons of business; a number simply wished to look upon Sanguinius. These pilgrims disturbed him, but their ranks grew daily. They doted upon their celestial angel-emperor. The stories they told dazzled themselves against the more mundane truth of him. There was talk of a growing cult that worshipped their father as a god, an alarming repetition of Lorgar's heresy, ever stronger now that Terra was feared lost to the Warmaster. Now, Sanguinius too had come to the uncomfortable situation where he had to deny his own divinity.

He was an angel in form only. He was not a god.

Terran vertebrate organisms were all tetrapods – four limbs were given each. He had six. If he had been gifted an additional set of arms rather than wings, he doubted very much that he would be regarded so highly. None of his brothers had these extra limbs, or anything like it. A four-armed emperor would be hard to adore.

All of the primarchs had their quirks, the same superhuman physiology, a unique apportioning of their father's many gifts. Some bore physical differences, but the majority of these were not of their father's making – Ferrus' hands, Magnus' missing eye, Vulkan's coal-black skin, Angron's barbaric implants. Could it not be the same with him, that the wings came from other hands? His wings were not a divine blessing; he had always feared them to be something else, and since Signus those fears had grown.

His wings were a teratology. The simple fact of Sanguinius' wings was that among all the primarchs, he was the only true freak.

And yet they had been his flesh and blood since birth. As much as a piece of him feared the truth of their provenance, the entirety of him loved them. Much good had come of them. Had they not been deemed so beauteous that they had stayed the hands of the mutant-hating tribes of Baal? And perhaps, he thought as he soared on his lonely flights through the skies of Macragge, it was the very fear of the corruption his wings represented that prevented him from becoming corrupted.

He had been tested on Signus Prime, and he was being tested again. Macragge presented a different kind of test. He had mastered his inborn fury on Signus; here he must go further and learn patience before he faced Ka'bandha again. That time would come, as surely as the death he saw in his mind's eye.

He smiled ironically. Fury came easily to him. The calm to hide it was a less simple emotion, but one long practised. Patience had never been his strong point.

The tall doors to the Receiving Chamber swung wide at his approach. A long avenue, ornate as a cathedral's nave on a backward world, divided another monumental space in two. This place too was crowded to bursting during the times of audience. In the evening it was empty but for his honour guard. Statues of the warrior kings of Macragge lined the way to the far end where other doors, huge and bronze and set into a multiply vaulted arch, led into the throne room's antechamber. The sharp smell of outdoor air curled from Sanguinius as he marched his way down the avenue, his last feelings of freedom evaporating with it.

'This better be important, Azkaellon,' he said to himself.

The second set of doors opened up. The antechamber was a tiny space in comparison to the plaza and hall that preceded it, eight of Sanguinius' strides across. Tall windows lined the side, set into delicate traceries of stone. They were set directly upon the walls of the Fortress of Hera, artificial cliffs faced with massive blocks of ashlar that dropped sheerly three hundred metres to the city. A statue of middling merit occupied much of the right-hand side of the chamber, but it was not there for its artistry. The whole thing was laced with explosives, a last-ditch boobytrap for those who might seek to lay the new emperor in the dirt with the old.

Sanguinius paused before the Master of Mankind.

The Emperor looked off to one side, His blank eyes fixed on an invisible vista.

'Why did You have to die, Father?' whispered Sanguinius. 'I am sorry for my presumptuous assumption of Your title. Roboute says You would understand. I am no longer so sure.' He touched the armoured foot of the figure. 'I am sorry for my uncertainty also. I am sorry we have failed You.'

Sanguinius bowed at the waist and touched his forehead, then passed through the golden doors of the throne room.

Another gargantuan hall, with a broad, high vaulted roof supported by two colonnaded arcades. A balcony ran along the bottom of the dome capping the centre of the space, directly above his throne.

His throne, he thought. The idea was ludicrous; indeed, it felt like a game.

The throne room was big enough for Sanguinius to take flight within, but he avoided doing so. He felt like a caged bird when he flew in there. Instead he walked down the long aisle.

'Azkaellon? I am here, my son. What troubles you so much to call me down from my meditations?'

There was no response. One of the banners lining the avenue rippled in a sudden cold draught. Sanguinius glanced at it, the trailing end of it flapping near where Guilliman had spent his wrath on the wall.

Sanguinius turned about. Most of the standing candelabra were out. A few lumen globes hovered in the air, casting a dim light that failed to penetrate the shadows confounding

even his primarch's eyes where they gathered most thickly. The room was cold. His feathers shifted as the skin around their shafts tightened.

He paused and sniffed the air. Beneath the chill scent of coming rain, there was a rank smell, noisome as the old filth of an uncleaned abattoir.

Hesitantly, he walked forward, every sense alert to danger. There was something very wrong.

Sanguinius regretted his lack of battleplate.

'Azkaellon?' he shouted. His voice thundered around the empty throne room.

He approached the throne, glittering emptily under a shaft of light. Guilliman had an aseptic way of doing things, but he had a talent for theatricality where it suited his goals. He walked up the dais, and from there was able to look up and down the throne room's entire length.

'Light,' he commanded. The candles did not burst into flame as they should. The sparsely situated lumens remained the only source of illumination.

There was a thickening of the shadow in the darkest corner. Sanguinius marched towards the dark spot. The vile smell grew stronger, and he half drew his sword in response.

Sanguinius reached the shape. A dark cloak of stinking, filthy material had been set up against a column. Its placer had cunningly arranged it, imbuing it with the semblance of human shape by means of precise folds. The Angel reached out and touched the cloak, and it collapsed with a foetid waft. He slid his sword back into its scabbard with a click.

'I'm behind you, Sanguinius,' said a voice, soft yet commanding the whole space of the throne room. Sanguinius turned to face it, his sword coming clear of his scabbard with a musical rasp.

Sat in Sanguinius' throne, Azkaellon unmoving at his feet, was his brother.

'*Ave Imperator,*' said Konrad Curze.

PART THREE

THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

TWENTY-THREE

Secret ways
Primary Location Alpha
Master of the mountain

High in orbit, aboard the teleportation deck of the *Lord Shadow,* Krukesh and Skraivok watched the hololith in silence.

Barabas Dantioch, the renegade warsmith, went about his business, unaware that he was being observed. The small hololith projector buzzed loudly, disturbed by unknown forms of interference.

'Fascinating, Skraivok,' said Krukesh. 'It appears you were not lying after all. What a shame. I was looking forward to having you killed. How did you do it?'

'My tech-magi, it was they who did the calculations,' said Skraivok. A flagrant lie. This was the hardest part, obscuring the source of the information. 'Pleasing, is it not?'

'They have done well. I will reward them,' said Krukesh.

'Not necessary,' said Skraivok smoothly. 'I have already done so, my lord.'

'According to Lord Skraivok's data, we have only a few moments, my lord,' said the Master of Teleportations.

'Wait,' said Krukesh. 'I want to watch this Iron Warrior. He may reveal something to us.'

The sound of the image was patchy, the voices of the men in the chamber thin and echoing. They could catch none of the conversation between the warsmith and the tech-magos who worked with him.

The image rippled.

'You must go now, Krukesh!' urged Skraivok. 'My Mechanicum contingent have no clear idea how long the window will remain open, but it will not last forever.'

Krukesh took a last look at the hololith. 'Very well,' he said. His helm cowl – decorated with bat wings, as his battleplate helm also was – was bolted into place over his head. He held out his arms so that his lightning claws could be placed upon his hands. 'To the pods!' he ordered. 'This better not be some kind of trick, Skraivok,' he added, dangerously.

'I did offer to lead the strike,' said Skraivok. 'To prove my confidence and my loyalty to you, Lord Krukesh.'

'You did. Of course it could be a double-bluff.' His voice growled out of the vox-grille of his helmet. As with all aspects of the Night Lords' battlegear, the voice distortion was intended to frighten. 'If I were not to take a few matters on faith, we would never get anything done. Provost, order the attack. We'll catch them by surprise.'

A tattooed serf officer snapped a crisp bow. The Terminators were all within the egg-shaped teleport pods. The pods' interiors were white but glowed luridly in sterilising ultraviolet light. The illumination was unnatural-looking, the teleport deck dark outside the pods. It always reminded Skraivok of home.

Krukesh walked into his and pointed one massive claw at Skraivok.

'I suppose if this works, I better stand by my promise,' said Krukesh. 'Maybe we can put aside our differences.'

Skraivok bowed. 'It is my wish only to serve you, my lord Kyroptera,' said Skraivok.

'Yes, well, there is a chance your conciliatory actions are genuine,' said Krukesh. 'Prepare to teleport!'

Gas hissed into the chambers from wide-mouthed vents as the doors of the pods shut on hissing pneumatics. The deck crew sprang into hushed action. Forty of them were required to operate the temperamental machinery, ten tech-adepts presiding, one for each pod.

The air pressure increased, similar to the growing presence of a storm. Generators in the next room pulsed with titanic power.

The deck crew and tech-adepts shouted to one another, ritualised announcement and response patterns that fell together with the rhythms of a shanty.

'Teleport target site locked.'

'Capacitor array primed.'

'Pod internal pressures at optimal.'

'All systems operating within acceptable parameters.'

'Biopatterning ready.'

'Transmission ready.'

'Geller apertures ready.'

So they ran off their checklist, station by station, the adepts chanting their machine cant. This worship of the machine had always seemed paradoxical to Skraivok. Why had the Emperor let it persist when He had suppressed every other religion? Because He was liar, and a hypocrite. An inconvenient truth His loyal servants chose not to see.

Get on with it! thought Skraivok. He glanced nervously at the hololith. The image quality was degrading. They did not have time to waste!

Losing Krukesh had its advantages, on the surface, but Skraivok would rather the Kyroptera made it to the assault site intact. His rivals would use the loss of their commander as a convenient excuse to execute Skraivok. Whatever the outcome, he would not remain there. He had his best men stationed nearby, and his shuttle remained prepared for flight.

'*Engaging, engaging!*' sang out the teleport crew in unison. Those men still possessed of human eyes flipped thick goggles of smoked glass over their faces. Servitors threw

massive lever switches. The whine of power reached a crescendo. Harsh white illumination glared from the narrow windows set into the pod doors, building from a couple of blinks a second to a headache-inducing flicker that pulsed faster and faster but never became a solid light.

The teeth-crawling sensation of active warp technology afflicted Skraivok. An odd scent penetrated his helm's mask. For a chilling second he though he heard laughter, and he knew that the daemon was amused.

The light blazed. Skraivok shielded his eyes.

'Teleport successful! Shutting down!'

'Shutting down!'

The light shut out. The weirding left. It did not cease – Skraivok thought that it was always there, somewhere, but it moved on from the deck, a powerful, unseen entity departing.

The pods hissed open, empty.

Quietly and without drawing attention to himself, Skraivok exited the teleport deck and headed to the embarkation deck. With the political situation as fluid as it was, he would be safer in combat.

'Throw them back!' roared Polux from atop the metal wall. 'Do not allow them into the mountain!'

His Lightkeepers stood shoulder to shoulder in the tunnel entrance. There had been forty of them assigned to the fortress-observatory of the Emperor's Watch, twenty of his own most trusted veterans, and twenty others drawn from the refugee members of the broken Legions. Guilliman had intended that all of his allies feel trusted. It was a diplomatic move more than a practical defence.

Polux gave silent thanks for politics. Without the Lightkeepers, the mountain would be lost.

Several had fallen. The paint of those left was scorched brown and black with a week of constant fighting. There was little difference between the bright yellow of his Imperial Fists, the sombre black of the Raven Guard and Iron Fists, the white of the White Scars or the green of the Salamanders. They were true brothers now, liveried in the colours of war.

All over the mountain the Night Lords attacked. Polux had left six major entrances open into the Pharos, more than he liked, but two of them were too big and awkward to block with landslides. Dantioch had vetoed the destruction of the tunnels themselves, and as it was, the blocking of so many entrances had compromised the strength of the beacon.

Six entrances. One was at the mountain's summit. Opening only on to the promontory, it was unassailable from the ground now the funicular was gone. Fire from the Emperor's Watch kept that area free from airborne assault.

That left five to defend. Three were low down the mountain, and most at risk. One was

held by the unwilling Mechanicum's remaining automata and their meagre number of Thallaxii guardians. Another of the lowermost was protected by Sergeant Solus and half of the surviving 199th.

And then there was this, a high slash in the southern face of the great mountain wall, and the most at risk. Polux deduced the enemy would concentrate their main attack there and had constructed a rampart across the cave mouth. In matters of siege, he was rarely wrong.

A sentry gun went up with bang, its remaining rounds cracking off like celebratory fireworks. A trio of Dreadnoughts led the way, their sarcophagi hung with the bloody remains of recent victims.

'Bring the ancients down!' ordered Polux. Bolt-rounds blew in profusion off his shield. The energy field generator had failed several minutes ago, stressed too far by the amount of incoming fire. Three lascannon beams stabbed out from the rampart. Two slammed into the lead Dreadnought, but it shrugged them off. Glowing holes shone in its armour. The third caught the Dreadnought protecting the lead machine's left flank. Its shoulder joint came apart in a spray of liquid metal and electrical discharge, and its arm hung limply at its side. It staggered, then advanced with its brothers.

'Again! Again!' ordered Polux.

Jetbikes roared past the cave mouth, strafing the metal bulwark. Polux had sited his defence carefully, giving the warriors manning it enough firing options without exposing them to the enemy outside.

A seething tide of Night Lords came up the mountain. Preliminary bombardment had scoured the forest and the minefields it concealed away. Unmanned sentry guns and concealed snipers thinned the enemy's ranks, but there were so many Night Lords.

The Dreadnoughts were thirty metres away and closing steadily. The slope here was shallow, too treacherous for siege tanks, but not quite the defender's gift the steeper upper mountainsides were.

'Bring them down – concentrate fire on the lead. Follow my targeting information. Mark.' Polux highlighted the head and joints of the oncoming Dreadnought unit leader with his auto-senses. 'Squad Three, rad grenades.'

A hail of fist-sized missiles were tossed out over the wall's sloping parapet. These were meant for the following legionaries, not their entombed brethren. They exploded with minimal force, spreading deadly clouds of intense, short-lived gamma radiation all down the mountain. The danger registered in their foe's auto-senses, and they were pushed together into narrow, invisible corridors as they tried to avoid the new hot zones.

'Support squad, open fire. Squads Three, Four and Seven firesweep rad-free zones.' Polux kept his commands simple, brief, lacking the adornment others used. He suppressed his Inwit accent, speaking the clearest Gothic he could so that all the legionaries would understand, wherever they hailed from. This was perhaps unnecessary; even had they not understood him, Polux fed an information-rich stream of combat data to the visors of all the legionaries under his command. The habit of his Legion was to leave nothing to

chance.

Muzzle flashes sparkled along the length of the forty-metre wall, spearing from gunloops and parapet alike. The heavy support squad adjusted the coherence patterns on their lasbeams, and fired again.

Four beams connected with the first Dreadnought, smashing its helmet, sending its arm spinning free, and punching through its sarcophagus. Its power plant detonated, sending hot metal scything out into the Night Lords. A second fell a moment later, one leg reduced to a tangled metal stump. It fell forwards onto its front, howling out its anger.

The third, that previously injured, did not last long after that.

The Dreadnoughts were an obvious threat to the wall, and had to be dealt with, but their advance had screened a hundred legionaries who were now closing to close assault range. The ancients' sacrifice had been calculated.

Some of the warriors carried lightweight ladders or grapnels. They flung these up against the wall as their brethren slammed melta bombs and shaped charges against the outer plating or brought lascutters into play.

The amount of firepower being traded was horrendous. So many bolt-rounds flew between the lines that they hit each other, the space between the opposing forces filling with small explosions. Three of Polux's men fell. Ruby beams of lascannons turned Night Lords into smoking piles of armour in return.

'Captain.' Polux was signalled by Chokis, the sole White Scar in his Lightkeepers. 'The lower gallery is breached.'

'Fall back,' ordered Polux. Chokis would not like the order, but would obey. 'Everyone, fall back to the second line.'

The enemy crested the wall.

Polux swung his massive power fist into the face of a Night Lord as he emerged over the parapet. The Nostraman's head vanished in a mist of metal and carbon atoms, the body fell backwards. Polux used the edge of his storm shield to push the ladder down. 'Fall back!'

Men either side of him left their positions, firing as they went. A dozen came out from the wall interior, lined up in the tunnel, and raked wall-top and wall-door with fire as their fellows retreated behind them. They departed with their faces to the enemy, their guns never silent.

Polux surveyed the scene. He calculated one hundred and ninety dead Night Lords, three downed Dreadnoughts. His defence force had lost ten. An acceptable trade were he facing an equal force, but he had far less coin of that nature to spend than the enemy.

He left with the last Space Marines. Night Lords were coming over the parapet unopposed. He slammed one in the chest, killed another near the stairs. A third leapt at him from the parapet, sword drawn, but he fell away before Polux could strike, slain by covering fire.

The stairs off the wall beckoned. Deeper in the tunnel was a second wall with fresh defenders fronted by a minefield. The tunnels were endless, and Polux had laid them all the way in with traps. If the Night Lords ever found their way to any of the primary locations, they would pay for every step in blood.

There was a flash, a curious sense of weightlessness, and Polux realised he was sailing through the air just as he connected hard with the smooth tunnel wall.

The rampart reared high, sundered in the middle, and crashed back to the rock in smoking ruin. Fire billowed out from the fortification, concentrated into a fierce tongue by the tunnel. Polux's head rang and blood pooled under his tongue. Four more of his men were down. A dozen Night Lords had been caught in the blast. Polux could not understand the kind of commander that would throw the lives of his troops away in such a manner.

More were coming, running through the wreckage, a dozen sailing down through the air on roaring jump packs.

Polux swayed to his feet. A few of his warriors were in the same difficulty, isolated from their fellows and unable to make the wall of covering loyalists. The Space Marines deeper in saw his predicament and stood firm, firing so much their bolters glowed with the heat of discharge. They downed Night Lords as they poured through the breached wall by the dozen, but were felled in turn, having no fortifications to shelter behind.

Raptors landed all around Polux. A deadly punch crushed the torso of a Night Lord, slew a second, a third he vapourised with his fist's underslung meltagun, but there were too many to fight and they surrounded the captain in a ring of leering gargoyle masks and obscene trophies.

His men called out for him, and many turned back to his aid.

Polux assessed the situation as he fought. If his men came to him, they would fail. Depleted of defenders, the second line would be lost.

'Fall back! Leave me!'

The Space Marines hesitated.

'Leave me!' Polux slew another foe. His power plant was hot on his back, running past its safety limit supplying energy to his fist. The raptors were all around him. The few of his own warriors trapped alongside him were slain.

Reluctantly the others fell back, firing at Polux's assailants where they could, and then they were gone, back into the safety of the mountain.

Raising his fist and shield, Polux charged.

'Watch the third engine!' commanded Dantioch. 'Do not allow it to go above seventy per cent total output.'

'The Pharos light is dim,' complained Magos Carantine. As he spoke, his second voice of binaric chittered instructions to his servitors. 'We have lost much capacity because of the landslides. Blocking the apertures has compromised the efficacy of the beam.'

‘It is enough. Corvo is locked in the transit beam. He will be here in a few hours.’ The mountain shuddered under an impact. ‘The Eighth become careless. We must hold on only for a while longer. Captain Corvo’s reinforcements will allow us to prevail.’

Carantine worked a whole bank of machines, mechadendrites waving over his back to plunge unerringly into dataports. Nine servitors worked alongside him with unusual speed, impelled by his augmetically enhanced brain. ‘I am not a strategist, but he comes with two and a half thousand against twenty thousand.’

‘It will be enough to stymie them until Lord Guilliman comes,’ said Dantioch. He limped up and down the wall of Mechanicum machines, casting a critical eye over the work of his own subordinates, offering rebukes or direction where needed. ‘All we need do is reinforce the mountain.’

‘But they must get into the mountain.’

‘There is a way,’ said Dantioch.

Battle noise sounded through the chamber, sometimes amplified, sometimes dulled by the Pharos’ odd acoustic properties. Dantioch had grown used to it and did not let it distract him from his task. ‘It is vital that the transit beam is maintained. A sudden loss will be catastrophic to the fleet!’ he scolded one technician.

He leaned in to readjust the Mechanicum focusing array installed in an unimportant-seeming chamber a hundred metres below. ‘This substream must not decohere!’

‘I am sorry, Lord Dantioch,’ said the man.

The warsmith continued his pained circuit. He had not departed Primary Location Alpha since the invasion began, too anxious of mishap to leave the machines in the hands of his servants, especially with Polux leading the mountain’s defence. He was irritable; part of him wished to be fighting again, to be free of the Pharos’ obtuse alien technologies. He walked past Carantine and his host of lobotomised slaves. It took all of Dantioch’s considerable will not to check the magos’ work too.

His concentration fully occupied, he did not see the greasy curl of teleport vapour gather itself at the rear of the tuning stage. His first warning was the bark of a bolter as one of his sentries opened fire. Half a dozen guns replied. The warrior crashed down.

Dantioch turned, pain gripping his side. A group of warriors garbed in Cataphractii Terminator plate stood at the back of the room, the teleport glimmer fading from the planes of their armour. They had not come through unharmed. One was buried halfway in the floor, his flesh and armour fused to the stone. Another stood motionlessly, his armour crumpled. A third had arrived around his armour, his viscera steaming on the outside of his stretched skin. Appallingly, this last lived for long seconds. The organs twitched with dying circulation. An agonised mewling came from somewhere within the scarlet folds of gore.

There were still eight of them, all in the bulky war-plate. Seven veterans, their armour decorated with images of horror and death, and an officer, sporting a crest of red bat wings upon his cowling.

There were four Ultramarines in the chamber with the warsmith. All were killed quickly, blasted apart by concentrated bolter fire while their own rounds exploded on the Cataphractii's energy fields or bounced from their thick armour.

Carantine was not given the option to surrender. His weak spots were expertly targeted; his cranium, power plant and organ flasks. All were blown apart and he fell to pieces without the chance to speak. His servitors froze as their datalink was severed.

'Do not cry out or call for aid,' said their leader, in a voice made grating and ugly by his vox-grille.

'If I were to, you would perish,' said Dantioch.

'I think not. My entire force assaults your mountain. I have five hundred of my finest about to breach the nearest entrance. There cannot be more than forty warriors between there and this location.'

'The ways through this mountain are not easily traversed,' said Dantioch.

The leader walked towards Dantioch, examining the room. He looked longest at the Mechanicum machine banks. He said nothing for a moment, conferring privately with his warriors. Three of them stumped off towards the only entrance into the mountain from Primary Location Alpha, three more went out onto the promontory outside the cave. There, steps led up to Polux's fortress. If they tried that road, Dantioch didn't rate their chances. He willed them to try it. The remaining pair came to flank their leader.

His commands done, the leader returned his attention to Dantioch. 'I am Krukesh the Pale, Kyroptera of the Eighth Legion and champion in the war against the False Emperor. I claim this facility in the name of Horus, rightful ruler of mankind.'

'I do not recognise Horus as my master.'

'That will change.'

'Will it? You cannot win.'

'Dear Dantioch! Does our presence here not suggest we already have?' said Krukesh. 'You only delay the inevitable.'

'You will never get out of this chamber.'

'I do not think that really matters, do you, warsmith? I suppose you are going to be tediously intransigent when I ask you to explain the workings of the beacon, so we shall move on to your interrogation.' He gestured at Dantioch. 'Take him. We will make him talk.'

As the Terminators came to Dantioch's side and painfully forced him to his knees, he cast a sidelong glance at the struggling Mechanicum machinery. Whole fields of indicator lights glowed red.

Without tending, the transit beam quietly failed.

The beam fascinated Corvo. It dragged them through the warp at tremendous speed, and

smoothly, the fleets' own immaterial drives shut down. There was little sense of the storm wracking real space and empyrean within the *Glorious Nova.* Tranquility reigned.

Wanting to better understand, Corvo had gone to his Mechanicum aides. When he asked them how it was done, they became agitated. Their augmetic eye clusters gleamed as inscrutably as always, but the faces of those less altered showed consternation at their ignorance, and their mechadendrites lashed.

Exertion at distance, they said. Forced attraction multiplied by gravity lensing. The shunting of excess mass accumulated by quantum entanglement effects allowing swifter travel through warpspace. The warp offered shortcuts to locations in real space. The transit beam smoothed the way. Its mass-cancelling effect enabled a craft to exceed the relative speed of light within the warp, a doubling of advantage of speed and distance. A cascade of binaric blurts and machine sounds followed. The usual Mechanicum obfuscation when they did not know what they were talking about. They did not like having their ignorance exposed.

Was it safe? he had asked.

They replied with a collective cybernetic shrug.

Nothing untoward had happened, so he could only assume that it was safe. The weighing and trading of risk was the cornerstone of successful theoretical.

Still he was not entirely comfortable. To rely upon the technology of the alien disturbed Corvo. Too many times had he fought against creatures inimical to humanity, and he had begun to form the opinion that all things associated with non-humans were unclean. This prejudice had taken root a long time ago, but it had begun to flourish after Astagar where he had fought Lorgar's Word Bearers and the warp-tainted machines they employed. In felling the corrupt Warlord Titan *Felghast* he had been confronted by human ingenuity suborned and perverted. Technology employed by alien species was often exotic, difficult to understand. How was it possible to tell whether that power came from the purity of material laws or through the sorceries of the warp?

The road they travelled engaged with the empyrean and so therefore could itself be the product of so-called Chaos. What little steps to damnation were they taking by using it?

He put such thoughts from his mind. The Lord Primarch himself had mandated the use of the Pharos, and it had kept the Five Hundred Worlds together. Nevertheless, he could not shake his concerns entirely. He wondered if he ever would. He was glad that such considerations were not his to ponder, and the practicals that inevitably came from them belonged to others to choose. Long may it remain so, he thought to himself. Give him the easily quantified risk exchanges of bolter, blade and battleship. Those were theoreticals he could comprehend.

A shudder ran down the spine of the *Glorious Nova*. Corvo snapped instantly out of his reverie.

'Helm station, report.'

'Lord captain, I have detected something disturbing.'

The ship groaned and rolled sharply enough to counteract the effects of the grav plating. Corvo grabbed at the railing around his command dais for support.

'We're losing speed!' reported his helmsman, Matheris.

'Is there a problem with our engines?' asked Corvo.

'Engines are still engaged at full,' reported the engineering cluster. Tech-adepts there exchanged rapid blurts of information.

A rattling groan boomed across the ship.

'We're gaining mass, captain,' said the command deck head magos.

'The Pharos,' said Shipmaster Valentian. 'The beam is failing.'

'Will we be cast from the warp?'

'Uncertain,' said the magos.

'We'll be torn to pieces!' said Valentian.

Corvo had been right not to trust it.

'Cut engines,' yelled the shipmaster. 'Full reverse thrust, bring our speed down to safe warp-engine operating parameters. Engine room, prepare immaterium drive for immediate activation. Now!' The order was relayed across Corvo's modest fleet; five Ultramarines cruisers beside the *Glorious Nova*, and the *Watcher* of the I Legion. All of them had suffered the same effects.

'Too late!' cried the helmsman.

The road of light blinked out of existence.

'All hands brace!' said Valentian.

Reality screamed, and the fleet was cast out of the warp, still travelling at tremendous speed.

As an object accelerated, so its mass increased. The Pharos enabled faster travel through the empyrean by using its sympathetic effects to bleed the extra mass away. Now it was off, and the spilled mass of the ships returned with murderous force.

Ships flipped and tumbled, their progress suddenly and catastrophically arrested. Dependent on the no-space of the empyrean, no human craft had ever been designed to go at such a pace in the world of natural laws. It was too much for the *Spear of Hermia*. The ship was crushed by its own mass, gone from something as light as air to the density of a neutron star in an eyeblink. Its reactor detonated, the star of its death weirdly stretched by the immense velocities of the fleet.

The *Glorious Nova* groaned. The pressure of deceleration was unbearable. For all the ship's energy fields and technological tricks, titanic forces pressed hard on Lucretius Corvo; the weight of the galaxy leaned on his chest. Men were flung forwards from their stations. Grav plating peeled away from the deck in long curling sheets torn free by their own energies. Servitors were ripped out of their housings. Everyone was shouting.

And then it was over. The ship adjusted to its sudden change in mass, somehow not shattering in the process.

'Report,' said Corvo. He pulled himself up off the floor. Something slid from his shoulder guard. It took him a moment to realise it was one of the bridge crew. The man had been thrown from his station, his rib cage smashed to splinters upon the Ultramarine's armour.

Dead men and women were everywhere, flung about like dolls, impaled upon machinery on every tier of the command deck. Fires burned in several parts of the bridge. The armourglass of the gallery windows displayed massive cracks. Were it not for the warp shutters being closed, they might have failed.

'Back to your stations! Report!' demanded Corvo.

The living pulled themselves up. Feet crunched on broken glass. From a decimated servitor choir a single, damaged survivor repeated, '*No… no… no… no…*' over and over again. Half of the crew were dead.

Corvo stepped down from the dais. His chest was bruised. Each breath was hard. The pain subsided quickly, healed with preternatural swiftness by his transhuman physiology.

He looked to the shipmaster's throne. Valentian had been reduced to a pulpy mess.

'Fire crews, to the bridge. Company report. Someone get vox and datasquirt contact with the rest of the fleet. I need fleet status now!' he said. He strode about the room, pulling the unhurt to their feet, comforting the injured brusquely. The other Space Marines on the command deck did the same.

'The Pharos effect has been terminated,' said a young ensign. He sounded panicky, but was keeping his fear under control. Already Corvo was judging his remaining command crew, seeing how they reacted. He had to reorganise them; they must be prepared for battle. 'But we are still proceeding at just under the speed of light.'

'Fleet reporting in. Damage on all vessels. The *Spear of Hermia* is gone,' said Matheris. Blood ran from a cut in his scalp.

'Get me full casualty reports, legionary numbers first,' he said. He meant nothing callous by it, he simply had an invasion to execute. Primary assets must be accounted for. 'Cartography, give me a positional.'

'There are no landmarks, my lord. This will take some time.'

'I am aware. Give me your best extrapolation.'

'Incoming transmission from the *Watcher*. Activate hololith,' said Matheris.

A life-size image of Company Master Alcuis of the Dark Angels appeared in the air, the commander of the small detachment of the I Legion attached to Corvo's command. Surprisingly the image of Alcuis' face was crystal clear, granted an illusion of solidity Corvo had not seen in the hololith since the storms began.

'*Corvo, what by the deeps is going on?*'

‘The Pharos is out.’

‘*Then it has fallen, and our task is fruitless.*’

‘Maybe, maybe not. We must proceed as before,’ said Corvo. ‘Nothing has changed. We must find a way into the mountain, and take it back if possible. If not, we must occupy the enemy for as long as possible until Lord Guilliman arrives. We cannot allow the Pharos to be utilised by the enemy, and it cannot be destroyed unless as an act of last resort.’

‘*We have lost a ship. We are sorely weakened, kinsman,*’ said Alcuis.

‘That is irrelevant. We have lost numbers, but our momentum is largely retained. In void war, speed is everything. We shall continue as planned.’

‘Captain Corvo!’ called out his cartography officer. ‘I have our position. At current speed, we are nine hours out from Sotha.’

‘*That is good news,*’ said Alcuis.

‘It is, my lords, and it is not,’ said the officer.

‘*How so?*’

‘We have to slow down,’ explained Corvo, ‘or we shall overshoot, and then we will be in no position to do anything. Contact my brother captains. Inform them we shall conduct a strategic review in twenty-five minutes in the strategium by lithocast. Matheris, you are shipmaster now.’

TWENTY-FOUR

Reunion
Fate versus will
Prophecies

Five feet of bright steel shone in the gloom, glowing with the inner light of an active disruption field. Curze shaded his dark eyes, playfully grimacing as if he were engaged in mock battle with a child.

'Do put that away, brother dear, there is no need.'

'You are no brother of mine, not any longer,' said Sanguinius. He paced slowly around the transept, circling the throne. He shifted the grip on his hilt, ready for Curze to strike. Curze was fully armoured in filthy blue battleplate. Around its neck seal his skin was grimy. The lines of the metal were thickly brown with old blood, but not his claws. Hooks on each wrist protruded far past his hands and gleamed with recent polishing.

Sanguinius' wings twitched. He doubted he would survive this encounter; Curze had taxed both the Lion and Guilliman when they had fought him together. But then, as he thought on it, flashes of the future burst in his mind, presenting him with a succession of strikes and counter-strikes. *Curze leaping from the throne, a flurry of blades. Sanguinius gutted. Sanguinius leaping into the air, Curze struck down. Curze waiting until Sanguinius was close, then striking his head from his shoulders. Sanguinius anticipating this, and burying his sword in Curze's sternum.*

He shook his head, dazed. Rapidly unwinding possibilities inundated his consciousness in blood. He attempted to shake them away, but they would not go.

Curze watched him with a species of malevolent curiosity. He idly tapped his long foot on Azkaellon's breastplate. The fallen legionary's perfect, noble face had the deathless beauty of a sculpture. Sanguinius listened hard to hear if his son still breathed. The soundscape of the hall was his to parse as he would through his post-human senses. Every draught and echo rolled drum-loud. The working of Curze's metabolism was the growling of a volcano close to eruption. Sanguinius' own body threatened to smother the sounds he wished to hear. For an anxious second he detected nothing, then he heard the whisper of air passing the fallen Sanguinary Guard's lips, the soft thud of twin hearts. Hope leapt in his breast.

'Azkaellon lives?'

Curze's lips parted a little to reveal the black stubs of his teeth. Sanguinius baulked at the reek of his breath. Curze rubbed a dirty finger and thumb together, a merchant's gesture. 'Insurance, nothing more. If you're nice, I'll let you have him back.'

'You have come to kill me, as you tried to kill the Lion and Roboute.'

'I have not.'

‘Don’t lie to me, Konrad. Why go to the effort? We both know how this will end.’

Curze rolled his eyes. ‘How many *times* must I tell you people that I have left that name behind? Night Haunter, Night Haunter! It’s not so hard to remember.’ He shook his head. Curtains of greasy hair brushed his war-plate. ‘Ah, ah! Not too close now, Angel.’ He rocked Azkaellon with his foot as one might rub the belly of a pet. ‘I can end the life of this one in a trice.’ His ruined smile widened. ‘But I won’t. Promise. I am here to talk.’

‘I have nothing to say to you.’

‘In that case I shall go then, so many profound apologies, dear brother,’ snapped Curze. ‘I have something to say to you, Angel, or does what I want not matter to the glorious emperor of mankind?

‘You always were querulous, Curze.’

‘Night Haunter!’ said Curze with feigned hurt. He slumped back in the throne. Azkaellon’s armour creaked under his foot as he pressed on it, and he sniggered. ‘The absolute factual nature of it, my brother, is that I am not sure I could kill you if I wished to.’ He flicked dried blood from under a dirty nail. ‘You and Guilliman speak so often of logic, so let us consider the evidence. In skill at arms, I outmatch you. I always have. I outmatch most of you. I am armoured, you are not. Your blade is of simple steel and energy, I have my claws.’ He tapped the back of one set on the eagle armrests of the throne.

‘Try then,’ said Sanguinius. ‘Attack. Let us put our relative skills to the test.’

‘Ahh, but there is more to the issue than simple war-craft,’ Curze chuckled. ‘Both you and I share something. A vision for the future. And that is a great equaliser. When one can guess what the other intends, what would be the point?’

‘This is the damn point!’ said Sanguinius, and angled the tip of his sword at his brother. He leapt at Curze on swift wings, bursting their chains as they snapped open. Curze moved so quickly Sanguinius barely saw him leave the throne. His brother became one with the shadows, his cloak whirling around him. Any other creature would have been undone, but Sanguinius was not. The flashes of foresight grew more intrusive, banging into his visual cortex as harsh as nails. He saw where Curze would be a moment before he was there, and attacked into the future. His sword was met by a claw. Curze’s return blow he expected, parrying it with his sword. And the next, and the next. He saw an opening. Curze closed it. Curze moved to gut him, Sanguinius was elsewhere. This went beyond anticipation. He *saw*.

They fought around the throne hall, the Angel and the Night Haunter. At speeds the normal human eye would struggle to follow, they matched each other blow for blow. Both saw their foe’s next movement before it occurred, and countered appropriately. Sanguinius’ visions, ordinarily so infrequent, poured through his head in a maddening torrent.

For long minutes they clashed, neither able to gain the advantage.

By unspoken agreement, the two of them parted. Curze’s stink was much increased by

his exertion, Sanguinius' flawless skin was sheened with perspiration. They panted lightly.

'You see? Not quite the same for you, I think, but you have a little insight into what my life is,' said Curze. He somersaulted backward, landing lightly on his feet by Azkaellon. 'And that is boringly predictable.'

'I am nothing like you!' said Sanguinius.

'No,' said Curze. 'All light and honour and hope and glory,' he spat bitterly. 'Whereas I must suffer a life bereft of surprise, each moment previewed before it occurs. Pity poor me!'

'Why are you here, Curze?' said Sanguinius. 'Are you to keep me talking until some guileful trap is revealed? I will not be gulled like our brothers.'

'No tricks. I speak truthfully. I come to speak. The truth.' He smiled widely and bowed.

There was a grace to Curze's movements that seemed obscene when performed by his gangrel figure. His presence was freighted with foreboding. He moved suddenly, almost too quickly to follow. Dark things in dark legends moved so.

He stooped and grabbed Azkaellon's ankle. 'I know!' he said with childish enthusiasm. 'Your next pronouncement is so "I will call my guard, my sons in gold! They and I will slay you, you cannot stop us all!"' Curze mimicked Sanguinius' voice cruelly, imbuing it with a vanity and vapidity Sanguinius feared accurate. 'Well, they won't, and I can. You saw what I did to the Lion's sons, and to those of the Avenging Beancounter. I will do it again, and gladly. If that is not sufficient to dissuade you, then the death of this one, so dear to you, so *beloved*, will be.'

'You are repugnant,' said Sanguinius.

'So pretty, so stupid, Father's favoured cockerel, preening in the hen coop! Is monstrousness not rather the point of me?' Curze replied bitterly. 'Tell me brother, I am curious. Are you one of the ones who believe our scattering was chance, or one of the ones who do not? I think Guilliman is in the latter camp. I can see the thought ticking round that tedious track of a mind he has, like a rodent in a maze, desperate to find a different way out but knowing there is only one exit and a feline waits without. Tick, tick, tick,' he cackled, raking his talons slowly through the air. 'Claws on the walls.'

'You came to ask me this? You are insane.'

'I came,' Curze shrugged. 'I am asking it. Does my purpose matter? Come, Angel. Do you really think it was chance? I want to know. Each one of us was cast away upon a world that turned out to suit our characters perfectly, characters our father engineered. Furthermore, the characters of many of our Legions' Terran sons were also matched with those of the worlds we were found upon. And, oh yes, we can both see the future. I rather suspect therefore that Father can read it like a periodical. Can you stand there and tell me that it was chance? No? No reply?'

'No,' said Sanguinius quietly.

'No reply, or no as in no, you don't believe it,' goaded Curze.

Sanguinius' sword lowered a fraction. Why he confided in Curze, he could not discern, but the words would out and he could not have stopped them even had that been his desire.

'No, I do not believe our losing was chance.'

'Yes, yes! You see?' Curze became excited by Sanguinius' agreement. 'A man who plans so long and so hard, to be taken in so at the moment of triumph? Nonsense. Congratulations, you are half the way to seeing the truth.'

'That our father was a liar?'

'Was…?' said Curze with a smile, his brow furrowing for just a fraction of a second. 'Indeed. A liar, and more – for I am a monster because that is all I can be, and you are an angel likewise.'

'You had a choice, Curze. Father only made us, He did not shape us.'

Curze's eagerness turned into a snarl.

'I was made to be thus! Nothing could change it. I know, because I tried! I did!' Curze's eyes gleamed with tears. 'For what, so that He might see me suffer as I failed? That He might tick off His observations upon His laboratorium chart? What kind of father makes a child to be one way, then castigates him for being so? You think me cruel? He is crueller! I was to be sanctioned for doing what I was made to do.' He clashed his teeth, suddenly vicious. 'How is that fair? How can I follow the man who did this to me?' As quickly as a wave is spent, his ire subsided, and his brittle, agreeable manner returned. 'So you see. He deserved betrayal.'

'That I do not believe, Konrad. Fathers lie to their sons to protect them, to save them. Our father hid Himself for untold millennia among mankind, revealing Himself only when He deemed the time right. The story of our scattering was a necessary lie, if indeed it is a lie. The difference between you and me is that you see sinister purpose behind His actions. I do not. His secrecy hurt me, Konrad, as much as it hurts you. And the conclusion you have reached hurts me also. But I will not cast myself into despair. That is the true difference between you and me. I will not abandon our father's dream. His plan is for the good of mankind.'

Curze sniffed. When not threatening violence there was something pathetic about him.

'Good given to a species singularly lacking in goodness. Did you know that here at the heart of Guilliman's perfect little paradise, there are those that are not cared for? I have been hiding in the Illyrian quarters. Roboute's vaunted civil codes wrap themselves around the edges of such places tight as walls, but do not penetrate its wards.'

Night Haunter approached his brother. Sanguinius matched him step for step, keeping the distance between them. Curze dragged Azkaellon around like a morose child might carelessly drag a toy, unaware of the damage being inflicted to the things it cared for as it fulminated on some meaningless slight.

'I have been there, among the outsiders, the unvalued. They speak of me in whispers.

They have learned to fear the dark. But has our brother found me? Has the Lion thought to look there, or anywhere on Macragge? No. Idiocy. I practically shouted to them to come for me! If you would look at this world and see the hope of the future, go to the poor quarters. There you will see the despair of the present. And you know as well as I, hope for the future is a lie. Everything goes back to the beginning, and our beginning is so very dark.'

'Is that what you believe, brother, that all this was inevitable?'

'I believe Horus' turning was part of our father's intended path.'

'I do not think so.'

Curze threw up his arms, as if he would embrace his brother. Azkaellon's boot clanked on the floor as he dropped it. 'See! What a marvellous heart to heart we are having. Why should we not? Our brothers have close relationships. Fulgrim regarded Ferrus very highly, before he killed him. And then Ferrus was also close to Vulkan. So easy to dislike, Ferrus, but so much loved by others. Perhaps there is some hope for me?'

'There is hope for us all, Konrad.'

Curze smirked. 'No, there isn't. I am hated. You have always hated me.'

'You were not hated. You–'

'I am hated!' he shouted. 'As much as Ferrus was loved. But what of love? It is he that is dead and I that live. My death will not come upon me unawares, unlike his, struck down by one who professed to love him. With such relationships between our siblings, why should you and I not be close? I will not be so presumptuous to say we are the same, that would be a desperate nonsense. But similar, yes. Yes, I think you can see that, can't you? An angel of light, and an angel of darkness!' He clapped his hands and clasped them together, but his expression changed from one of joy to one of puzzlement. 'I wonder, if our positions had been reversed, would I be there in golden glory, and you stood here in filth? I do not think so, I think that you would be dead,' he said softly.

'Then by your own admission, we are not alike.'

'We are brothers! You and I *are* alike.'

'You cannot have it both ways.'

Curze sneered. 'Why not? Father did. We, we, we're both rageful. You know rage. I can taste it on you, it clings to you like the stink on a week-old corpse.'

'We are Promethean beings. All of us are troubled by temper. It does not distress me,' said Sanguinius.

'I know better. You think yourself the master of anger, because you have faced it and you have fought it and you have won. Maybe you are, brother, maybe you have conquered the monster in us all. Guilliman has never faced it, not truly. Guilliman's dear old Euten was there to hold his hand when he was scared. He buried his passions under a sheet of ice and calculations while mother smoothed his hair. Who was there for the Night Haunter as he

shivered in the dark? I was sent away, alone, to a dark hell.' His voice thickened with emotion. 'I have known privation that would destroy you. I saw the weak bedevilled by the strong. Raped, mutilated, consumed. And I raged and I raged against it, and I tried, Sanguinius.' He held out his hand. 'I tried so hard to make it right.' His hand clenched into a fist. 'Until I saw that I was fighting the true order of the universe. I understood that I cannot fight suffering, I came to realise that I had been made to perfect it. We are born, we suffer, and then we die. Nothing we do can prevent that, nothing we are is ours to choose. It is all set, right at the beginning, it was all set long ago. Why can you not see this one simple truth?'

An image – the image – flickered into Sanguinius' mind. Himself dead upon the floor, Horus' face, bloated by unimaginable evil, leering over his corpse. Konrad nodded encouragingly, as if he saw it too.

'We live in a universe where our thoughts and fears give birth to things that greatly desire to devour us. They seem stronger than we, these neverborn, but they are not. Without us, they are nothing. Without them, we are hollow vessels of clay, hurrying to be dust again. The same coin, different sides, and we strive to annihilate each other. There is no *point*, Sanguinius, no reason to any of it, do you not see?' Curze became wheedling, desperate to convince. 'Father is the worst of all. He is troubled by the vice of hope, Angel. He sees more clearly than any of us. He knew everything. He lied to protect Himself. The warp, the powers there. It is a sign of His weakness that He could not trust us with that knowledge! I have seen so much. There are gods, and they hunger. Nothing can triumph over them! There is only suffering, and death is no release.' He spoke quickly, the words tumbling out of him in a rush of despair. Acid spittle leapt out with them, poisoning the flagstones. 'Hope is the cloth that blinds us. Rip it from your eyes and you shall see what I see. Brother!' he said in a hush. 'I see the vision that haunts you. You will fall at the hand of Horus. I know! I know as surely as I know I will die at the will of our father, that that is and always was the culmination of His plan.' He scowled. 'Perhaps we shall not be friends. Family is so overrated.'

'Your talk does not deceive me.'

'I am not deceiving you!' yelled Curze. 'Listen to me, you pompous fowl! Only you, only you of all them, Sanguinius, only you can understand–'

Sanguinius interrupted him. 'You are here for a reason, Curze, what is it? Your sons assail the Pharos world. You–'

'My sons?' said Curze quickly. Curze's moods flickered rapidly, the candle of his sanity forever on the verge of extinguishment. A change came over him and he was suddenly thoughtful, his comments of moments ago forgotten. 'Really?' He tapped his chin with a ragged nail. 'How very interesting.'

'You feign ignorance. Speak truth to me in the spirit of honesty you demanded.'

'My ignorance is genuine. I truly have no idea what they are doing. I abandoned them at Thramas. I thought them all dead – that was my intention, in any case.' He snickered to himself. 'But I am quite impressed. They start a war on their own! Clever boys, I thought

they had lost their way completely. Yes. Murderers and fiends all, I hate them. But perhaps they will have their uses, after all. This rather puts a different light on things. If I cannot control them, and they will not die, then I may choose to direct them once more.'

'The faults of your sons are the faults of the father.'

'Oh, how very apt. As we exhibit the faults of our own. My children are not like yours, so noble, so brave, so beautiful!' He cupped his face in his hands. 'Do they know what poison you have put inside them? Don't be so po-faced. I know the thirst you hide. Such things I saw in the warp. One of Father's little friends tried to kill me with a daemon. It didn't work, but it carried me into the empyrean. I had quite the view while I was there.'

'Nothing can survive the warp.'

'I did. Am I nothing? You hurt my feelings. I survived and now I know everything. I know how it will end.' A sly look came over him. 'And I know what Father really intended. Not that it matters, the galaxy will burn forever. There are things coming that make Horus' little insurrection seem positively benign.'

'You are lying.'

Curze waggled his head. 'I do lie, that is very true, quite often. I am so sorry about that, call it a personal failing. But I do not lie this time. I am telling the truth. Because, you see, I have no reason not to tell the truth.'

There was a noise at the door, then a shoving. Muffled shouting came from outside.

'Aha, as I foresaw, the shining sons of the Angel come.' Curze picked Azkaellon up. His spare frame hid enormous strength, and he carried the Blood Angel like a doll. 'Time to go, time to finish our little chat. Now I come to the meat of it. Tell me, brother – I saw a great vision of you at Signus, I saw what happened there. I heard the howls of the neverborn as you threw them back into the warp.'

'That was before you came here.'

'There is no time, fool! The warp showed me that, everything happens at once. Don't you see? That is how we see! Time is a book to be read at will. Tell me, why did you not turn? You could have snuffed Horus out like a candle. They offered you the galaxy as a plaything.'

'You overstate their offer. I will not be a slave.'

'You are a slave. A slave to Father's will, and a slave to fate. Our only choice is what manner of slavery we shall embrace, and even that choice is an illusion.'

'There is always a choice.'

'There never is a choice,' spat Curze. 'Everything goes back to the beginning, round and round and round and round and round, clack clack clack, all the little cogs, turning turning turning turning.'

The hammering from outside changed. Heavy combat weapons were being employed against the door, a bone-shaking crunching that boomed loudly with every dent put into

the metal. ‘Do you not think it should have been you? Should Father have chosen you as Warmaster, do you think?’

‘What?’ said Sanguinius incredulously.

‘It’s a fair question!’ protested Curze. ‘Roboute sees fit to declare you emperor! Do you not think the Emperor could not have seen fit to declare you Warmaster? You see, although I see your actions before you do, our shared abilities makes reading your intentions so very hard. Your fate is your fate, not mine, and I am genuinely curious. To tell you the truth,’ he laughed apologetically, ‘it is killing me. I have to know.’

‘It should not have been me,’ said Sanguinius. ‘I am not perfect. I am not worthy.’

Curze burst out laughing, so hard he could not control himself. His rank breath choked the room. ‘I am sorry! I am sorry, that is so marvellous. If you were not worthy, then what about Horus?’ He laughed again.

‘I would have been tested as he has been tested. I am glad I did not have to risk failure.’

‘Then prove it. Prove your loyalty to dear Father.’ Curze wiped tears of mirth from his face. They left tracks in the filth. ‘Kill me. I won’t stop you. Let it be a test. I say that I shall die by Father’s command.’

‘Father is dead.’

Curze frowned for a moment, confusion flickering across his gaunt features. ‘My future cannot be changed, for that *is* the future, and the future is as dead as the past. You say otherwise. If my conviction is incorrect then you can change it right now. Slay me. I will not hinder you.’

Sanguinius hefted his sword. For a moment they stared at each other. Curze stood with his arms wide open. The Night Haunter tensed in anticipation. ‘Do it! Run me through with your sword, you coward! Do what Vulkan, the Lion and dull Roboute could not! Kill the monster and prove your worth!’

Sanguinius ran at his brother, his sword raised. A look of joy crossed Curze’s face.

The Angel’s sword descended in a blurring arc, and stopped a hand’s breadth from the crown of Curze’s head. The steel hummed at its sudden arresting.

Something had stayed Sanguinius’ hand. He stepped back, then reversed and sheathed his weapon.

Curze’s eyes snapped open. His face twisted with fury and despair.

‘I will not do it,’ said Sanguinius. ‘Letting you live is punishment enough.’

‘Do not lie to me!’ screamed Curze. ‘This is not about punishment, I thought we were being honest with each other.’

‘There is always hope, brother. Even for you.’

‘Hope is an empty dream,’ said Curze honestly. The unhealthy fervour left his face, taking the madness from his eyes. Without the energy of his broken mind, he seemed

diminished and sad. He ran a dirty finger along the pinions of Sanguinius' wing, a madman touching something he believed too wonderful to be real. The limb twitched angrily, and Curze snatched his hand back. 'I sincerely wish there were hope, but that I cannot believe.'

Sanguinius held out his hand to his brother. 'You are a shadow of what you should have been, Konrad. In spite of everything, I pity you. Come with me. It is not too late. We can heal you, and you might be greater.'

Curze's face crumpled, and the spark of insanity ignited in him again. 'Pity? I do not need your pity! Sanguinius, Sanguinius, fairest of us all… When will you learn?'

The pounding on the door grew louder. The metal buckled. Curze glanced at it, then back at the Angel. He backed away, held up Azkaellon by the arm and grinned.

'No matter how hard we wish otherwise, in the end, there is only *chaos*…'

He raised his other hand. He was nearing the outer wall closest to the doorway.

'You promised you would not harm him.'

'We are like Father in so many ways.' His eyes glinted. 'Just like Him, I lied to you…'

'No!' screamed Sanguinius.

Curze raised his hand and sliced through Azkaellon's arm above the elbow. The Sanguinary Guard captain fell, but Curze caught him around his back. Blood sprayed upwards, catching Curze full in the face. He leaned into it, letting it run over him, eyes bright with ecstasy.

All this Sanguinius saw through a prism of horror. Time slowed. Every drop of Azkaellon's blood that hit the floor was an executioner's drumbeat.

Shame gripped him as his mouth watered.

The world was turned inside out.

The dead man's switch wired into Azkaellon's gauntlet tripped, and the statue of the Emperor in the antechamber exploded, blasting the doors inward and annihilating the Sanguinary Guard clamouring beside it. Rubble and body parts skittered across the marble. Sanguinius was sent flying backwards by the shockwave, slamming him into his throne.

The wall of the throne room collapsed outwards, bringing down part of the ceiling. Blood and powdered mortar stained the flagstones. Ruined masonry thundered down the ramparts of the Fortress of Hera and into the city beneath.

Curze was unharmed. By chance or design, he had found a place untouched by the blast. He stood by the breached wall, a cold wind from outside stirring his stinking cloak.

He looked back at his brother, Azkaellon's mutilated body in his arms. The two primarchs locked eyes, and a flash of profound understanding passed between them. Curze's sorrow and rage flooded into Sanguinius, and the Angel fell to his knees before

the throne.

‘How could I have known?’ he gasped. ‘Konrad!’

Azkaellon’s arm had been severed at the elbow, but a thick clot of Larraman cells scabbed over the stump. Such a wound was grievous for a legionary, but not fatal. Azkaellon stirred and cried out as Curze lifted him over his head.

‘You do not have to do this,’ said Sanguinius.

‘If you believe that, then my visit has been a waste,’ said Curze gently, almost tenderly. And then he changed again. ‘Everything goes back to the beginning!’ he hissed.

Then, with a whip-crack lunge, he tossed Azkaellon from the ramparts.

He lifted skyward, sent high by Curze’s wiry strength and seeming to hang a moment over the city lights of Magna Macragge Civitas. Then he plummeted from view.

But Sanguinius was already moving, wings spreading, leaping out into the rain and the dark and diving down the soaring ramparts, desperate to catch his beloved son. His feathered pinions beating desperately, he drove himself groundwards.

His hands closed around Azkaellon’s greave only metres above the tops of the tallest buildings. Sanguinius sent himself up into a long swooping glide as the ground rushed at them, the change in direction tearing at his primarch muscles. He hauled Azkaellon up into his arms, and circled about to the fortress.

By the time he returned to the throne room, Curze was nowhere to be seen.

The Night Haunter, from Dantioch's sketchbook

TWENTY-FIVE

The mountain chained
The festival of flesh
Unclean illumination

Of all the weapons in their armoury, pain was the Night Lords' most favoured, and they did not stint in its application to Barabas Dantioch. Recognising they could not remove his armour without killing him, they had applied their talents to his neural interfacing, attacking his nervous system through its connection to his battleplate.

Seeing the Emperor's gifts turned to such unpleasant ends saddened Dantioch. That these brothers at one remove had fallen hurt him far more than their wilful cruelty ever could. They had ever been a vicious Legion, but Dantioch understood their methods, and their exigency. Futhermore, he could not blame them for what they were. Their ways were intended by the Emperor, as much as his own Legion's expertise had been.

But if they did not have a choice in what they were, they did over how to be, and they had chosen badly.

For the seventh time that day Dantioch was dragged before the wooden chair at the centre of the tuning stage and commanded to kneel before Krukesh the Pale. Painfully, he got to his knees. His attempt to shift a little to take the strain from his damaged joints was stopped by his captors, who thrust down on his shoulders with their hands.

The fortress peak of the Emperor's Watch had fallen. Night Lords landed upon the promontory unopposed. Primary Location Alpha bustled with warriors in midnight blue. Several Techmarines were meddling with the Mechanicum's machinery. Off to one side, an Apothecary and Techmarine huddled over the dead Magos Carantine. They held large data-slates whose trailing wires went into Carantine's exposed skull. They were stripping the magos' datacore. Death was no release from the Night Lords' brutal interrogations.

Seven members of Polux's garrison had been captured. They had been stripped of their battleplate. Blood leaking around their interface ports spoke to the Night Lords' lack of care. Six were fastened, naked, to X-shaped crosses set up around the room, but were as yet unharmed. The seventh was upon the floor, his ankles and wrists bound to each other with great shackles that cut into his skin, his head kept on the ground by the boot at his neck.

'This machine – are you ready to tell me how it functions?' said Krukesh testily.

Barabas remained stonily silent. Every part of his body hurt. But Dantioch was no stranger to agony. Since the Schadenhold a surfeit of pain was his to enjoy every day, what was a little more? His breathing was more ragged than ever, but he prevailed, and took satisfaction in Krukesh's frustration at his refusal to talk.

Krukesh stared at the warsmith. He breathed out loudly and drummed his fingers on the chair's arms. 'What am I going to do with you? You really must speak with me, Barabas. I

have ascertained the use of this device. It is a beacon, that is obvious. I can safely assume that it is visible in the warp as well as real space. I will discover how it works soon enough. In saving me a few hours, you can preserve the lives of these noble warriors who fought so hard to defend you, when you yourself could not.' Krukesh's black eyes flicked over Dantioch's crippled body.

Dantioch said nothing.

'This is not only a beacon, that much I have deduced,' he went on. 'It must also be useful in other ways. I suspect that it also functions as a communications device. How else does the Lord of Macragge organise his petty kingdom? I see no other way for him to do so. The disturbance in the warp is such that astrotelepathy is somewhat useless, vox, indeed any electromagnetic device, is far too slow and prone to disruption by the physical manifestation of the storm. So, if I am to follow my reasoning to its logical conclusion, my hypothesis must be that it has a warp effect. Perhaps it allows untroubled use of your astropaths? Is there a carrying beam for psychic communication? Am I close? No?' Krukesh leaned forward encouragingly. He threw up his hands when Dantioch looked away.

'Well then, say nothing. I shall rely on my wit. I see no astropaths here, and my own psykers – those that are still more or less sane – tell me that this place is a psychic blank as much as a material one. Is it the machine itself that allows communication? And if it can do all these marvellous things, then perhaps it allows a man to look upon what he wishes? How does it work? Tell me!'

'I will not,' said Dantioch.

Krukesh sighed in irritation. 'Very well.' He nodded to the Atramentar stood beside the bound Space Marine. The warrior lifted his boot off the man's neck, then stamped down hard on his head. The Space Marine's head popped with a wet crack.

'Shall we try again? I think you understand the rules of this game. I ask you a question, you tell me what I want to hear, or one of your lickspittle Emperor-lovers dies. How does it work?'

'You will burn in the Emperor's wrath. You and all of your murderers. The Avenging Son will destroy you all.'

Krukesh stood, and backhanded the warsmith across the face. Dantioch's head snapped round. His mask was dented by the blow and pushed against his face uncomfortably. Dantioch spat blood.

'You will talk, Dantioch.' He drew his bolt pistol and shot one of the garrison strung up at the edge of the room in the heart.

'Kill them all you wish, kill me,' said Dantioch. 'We die knowing we serve the truth and the man who would save the human race. You demonstrate your weakness, siding with the Warmaster for personal gain. Where is your honour?'

'These legionaries died cleanly, the others will not,' warned Krukesh. He walked around the warsmith. 'We have become adept at bringing pain to Legiones Astartes physiology,

such pain as will break even an Ultramarine. And if they do not talk, your human assistants surely will.'

'If you can find them.'

'Oh, we will. This mountain's caverns are extensive, not infinite. Such pain we shall show them, they will be eager to tell us your secrets. You have had a taste, but we have been generous with you. Come now! Your entire Legion has joined the Warmaster's cause, how can you sit there in glorious isolation? You are a relic, clinging to the falsehoods of the past! See your position for the foolishness it is, and side with us.'

'If your truth is self-evident, then why are you resorting to torture?'

'Fear is a weapon, useful as any other.'

'I know no fear,' said Dantioch.

'We all know fear. It is merely suppressed. Feeble doctrine that can be overcome. You will see fear in the eyes of these warriors again if you do not aid me!' Krukesh said. 'Show me the centre of the little town here. There are things there that may convince you to speak more readily.'

'No,' said Dantioch.

Krukesh hit him again. Spots whirled in front of Dantioch's eyes, and he felt faint, but he forced himself to kneel upright, and stare defiantly into Krukesh's eyes.

At a gesture from Krukesh, a Night Lord plunged a thin blade into an Ultramarine's eye and plucked it out. The warrior gritted his teeth at the pain, but did not cry out.

'Show me the city!'

'No. Torture these men as much as you will, but they will not speak, and they will rightly curse me if I do.'

'Again!' shouted Krukesh. 'Flay that one slowly at my command. I give you one last chance, warsmith. I desire to see the city!'

Night Lords produced flat-bladed skinning knives from rolled sheaths of human skin. They advanced on the one-eyed Space Marine, who stared resolutely ahead.

All of sudden, the rumble of the distant quantum-pulse engines became audible and every Night Lord in Primary Location Alpha brought up his weapon.

'Claw lord!' said one of the Atramentar. 'The wall!' All of them were stirring, looking toward the Pharos tuning stage, amazed at what they saw. Krukesh turned from Dantioch.

An image was coming into being at the front of the chamber. Unfocused, it grew in clarity as Krukesh watched. He stepped towards it, and it grew sharper still, until they looked upon the market square of Sothopolis.

'Fascinating,' said Krukesh. 'Absolutely fascinating. You have been hiding this from me, this marvel?' Krukesh's delight overcame his anger.

Dantioch felt no delight. The Pharos showed him a scene plucked from some primitive's

imaginings of hell. A sense of oppressive horror came over the empathy field. He was a veteran of dozens of campaigns. He had seen human and alien societies purged without mercy, but what he saw sickened him more than any sight he had ever seen. The market square had been transformed into a torture house. Bodies hung from poles in chains, or were trapped in gibbets, or pinned to frames. All of them bore signs of horrific mutilation. Large cages contained the few surviving people of the city. Their expressions were slack, blank, wide-eyed pictures of despair. The wickedness they had witnessed had driven all reason from them.

'Did you do this?' asked Krukesh. 'Tell me how it is done!'

Dantioch looked in disbelief at the scene. Oily smoke rose from braziers upon which burned human flesh. Through the empathic field of the Pharos he felt the citizens' fear, the all-pervading, hopeless terror of those who were about to die in agony.

'Did you do this?' repeated Krukesh. 'How did you summon the image?'

A choice lay before the warsmith: tell Krukesh that it was the claw lord himself who had activated the Pharos, or lie and retain his usefulness.

'Yes,' Dantioch said. 'I did it. To save the suffering of my comrades.'

Krukesh smiled in triumph. 'You see, I knew you would come around in the end.'

Krukesh could not know that Dantioch had done nothing, and the warsmith was dismayed. The Pharos had taken Krukesh's desire to see the square and provided. It had responded far more quickly than it had to Dantioch; it had taken the warsmith months to effect his first proper tuning. But his mind was iron, disciplined, imagination shorn and replaced with cold logic. The Night Lords knew no restraint, they acted on their dark desires without compunction. Was he, as a loyal servant of the Imperium, too fettered in mind to exploit its capabilities? A chill gripped the warsmith.

'I… I can feel them, the people in the square. I can sense their despair!' Krukesh held up his hands, spreading his fingers as if he might touch the pain of others as one can feel the current in a stream. The pleasure it brought him stoked a fire of hatred in Dantioch's heart. 'Ha! What a marvellous, marvellous machine,' said Krukesh. 'What else does it do?'

'You are most perceptive, claw lord.' Dantioch bowed his head in shammed humility. 'It is a beacon, and it allows instantaneous communication. A modicum of empathy is transmitted along with the image. That is all.'

'So this is how Guilliman maintains control!' Krukesh walked to the edge of the transmission field. 'I could never have guessed the reality of it. It is like being there. It is more real than being there!'

'Miraculous technology,' agreed Dantioch.

'How does it work?'

'I do not know. The Mechanicum do not understand. It operates to laws we are unaware of. The shape of the mountain's tunnels seem to be the basis of its technology.'

‘Power source?’

‘None we can detect, claw lord,’ lied Dantioch.

‘As soon as your petty band is rooted out from the mountain, I will bring my own Mechanicum here. They are less bound by false morality than yours. They will discover its secrets, no matter what it takes.’

‘Maybe,’ said Dantioch. ‘I doubt the masters of the Dark Age of Technology would have understood it. It is like nothing else either I or they have seen in the galaxy.’

‘And we have it!’ Krukesh’s enthusiasm overcame his enmity for the warsmith momentarily. ‘With this, I can communicate with Horus! I can bring the Legion together!’ Krukesh was close enough to the edge of the field that his lust for power radiated strongly from him.

I will use it against him, Dantioch resolved. *I will destroy this monster, I will extinguish the candle of his life if it is the last thing I accomplish. Let this be my oath of moment, and let me be forever bound to honour it.*

‘Get him up, get him up!’ urged Krukesh. He gave his men a scornful look. ‘How can you treat this great mind so?’ He beckoned to the warsmith. ‘Come, Barabas, come to me. Let us forget our quarrel. This is a time for celebration.’

Dantioch hobbled across the chamber towards the picture-perfect tableau of horrors. The image panned around the square in accordance with Krukesh’s subconscious desires, treating Dantioch to more unimaginable torments being heaped upon the inhabitants of Sothopolis. There was a pit from which echoed the most terrible screams. The force of emotion coming from it had bile rising in Dantioch’s throat. On a table, at the edge of the pit, was a stack of what looked like animal hides. He knew immediately what they were: all sizes, men, women and children, the flayed skins of the Sothans.

‘Feel the terror! This is the most miraculous aspect of the device!’ Krukesh shut his eyes and breathed deeply. ‘I can smell the blood!’

The view changed again, and the marketplace disappeared. A view of the fire-blackened mountainside took its place. A Night Lord in sooty armour stood there, conferring with his warriors. At their feet lay a bound giant.

‘Skraivok!’ shouted Krukesh, then laughed as the other leapt backwards in surprise, his gun up. ‘It is I, Krukesh! We have the beacon, and I have it working.’

‘How are you speaking with me?’ said Skraivok.

‘This device, that the Ultramarines have been so selfish with.’

‘It is as if you stand in front of me!’ said the other in amazement.

‘How goes the battle on the peak?’

‘Slowly, claw lord,’ said Skraivok. ‘After your teleport I returned here to take command myself. The enemy have retreated to their second lines of defence. The tunnels are rigged with anti-personnel devices. We have yet to effect an entrance to the lower tunnels. But we

have a prize for you, claw lord – here.' Skraivok kicked his captive. 'Without their leader, their resistance will falter soon enough.'

At Krukesh's interest, the Pharos turned its attention upon the bound warrior.

'Captain Polux!' he exclaimed.

Dantioch's hearts skipped several beats.

'You have outdone yourself,' continued Krukesh. 'Your failure to breach the lower halls is of no matter. We have little to fear here; the way into this hall is well defended. Order your men to continue the fight, and join us here. Bring Captain Polux with you. We all have so much to discuss.'

Krukesh turned to Dantioch.

'The people of the town did not know much of use regarding your operations here, but they did tell us of your affection for the Imperial Fist. If pain is no motivator when applied to you, perhaps it will be when given to your friend? And we have no reason to be gentle with him, Barabas Dantioch, not like we were with you. You had better talk further, reveal the full potential of the xenos mechanism, or be prepared to watch your friend die in agony, piece by bloody piece.' He turned back to the image. 'Nothing will keep me from the truth.'

Ten officers – company captains, praetors, shipmasters and others – stood in lithocast array. They watched Lucretius Corvo through the eyes of servo-skulls and pict-capture units embedded into the statuary of the *Glorious Nova*'s strategium. The officers were projected by lenses in the pedestals, each giant warrior imbued with an inner lambency that made them phantasmal in the dark room. Only the light and the occasional flicker of interference betrayed them as hololith images; all were aboard their own ships.

'Warsmith Dantioch imparted a great deal of information to me before we set out,' said Corvo. 'Including a number of practicals based upon the situation as it was then, and several theoreticals as to how the battle might develop. We can only presume that the cutting off of the transit beam means that the Pharos has fallen.'

The others watched silently, none more intently than Alcuis of the Dark Angels.

'There is no method we have to confirm this assumption, but it is the most likely theoretical. Therefore our original mission, to reinforce Mount Pharos and prevent its capture by the Night Lords, must undergo adjustment as per Lord Guilliman's orders. Data transmissions to each of you hold detailed practicals of what I expect from you all. Make no mistake, this will be a difficult mission. Many of us will die.'

They expected this, and said nothing. Corvo did not speak at length often, when he did he was worth heeding. He walked between the hololith plinths.

'Our goal has become one of distraction and delay. There are two eventualities we are to work against. The first and most important is to prevent the destruction of the Pharos. It is likely that the Eighth Legion will withdraw and destroy the site from orbit rather than relinquish it intact.'

‘*And how are we to prevent this?*’ asked Palaearch, captain of the 82nd.

‘In a moment, brother,’ said Corvo. ‘The other theoretical we wish to avoid is that the Night Lords discover how to utilise the Pharos. If they summon their own reinforcements to Sotha, we will surely lose the Pharos permanently. A worse scenario is that they will broadcast to their allies among the other traitor Legions what the light is, and direct it again upon Macragge. Whichever way this theoretical is postulated from position one – that being the Night Lords holding the Pharos for any length of time – the following chain of logic is unpalatable. In a best case scenario, communications will be disrupted all across the Five Hundred Worlds for some time. The worst case theoretical is the destruction of Macragge, the fragmentation of Ultramar and the loss of the war.’

‘*Will the Warmaster redirect his efforts to Ultramar?*’ asked Alcuis. ‘*Is it not one gamble too many for him? Horus acts quickly. He has always driven for the heart. The tactics of his Legion are direct, as are his strategies. His strength must be within the Segmentum Solar.*’

‘Your Legion brothers are the masters of secrets – you see that very shortly we shall have none,’ said Corvo. ‘Should Horus discover that three of his surviving brothers are in one location, there is a high possibility he will attack Ultramar in force no matter what goal he is currently intent upon. If he were to kill Sanguinius, the Lion and my lord Guilliman, the loyalist war effort would be crippled.’

‘*Preventing the destruction of the Pharos, while preventing our enemy from using it – these theoreticals are contradictory. How can we fulfil both, brother?*’ asked Captain Marcellus of the 29th company. ‘*We are only two and a half thousand to their twenty thousand*.’

‘*Divide them. Confuse them,*’ said Alcuis. ‘*Strike and withdraw. That is what you are about to suggest.*’

Corvo gestured, and a hololithic map of the Sothan System blinked into life over the strategium’s primary projection plate. ‘It is the best practical under the circumstances. Our speed grants us a great advantage. Thanks to the transit beam’s residual effect we still proceed at close to the speed of light, and will continue to until we choose to decelerate. The image of our ships will arrive only hours before we do. They will not be expecting us, nor will they have time to prepare when they do notice our approach. As we all know, communication through the storm is problematic. The energy fields of the Sothan beacon make it worse. There is a high chance we will take them completely unawares. If we launch a spread of projectiles ahead of us, that shall greatly even the odds.’

‘*We should be careful. Any impact from a solid munition going at such velocity could split the planet in two,*’ said Shipmaster Javin of the *Battle King*. ‘*We cannot afford to miss.*’

‘All firing patterns will be calculated and recalculated, and approved by me before execution,’ said Corvo. ‘We shall use only minor ordnance. This will minimise the risk. I shall take full responsibility for any collateral damage. But we must see our velocity as an advantage. As you say, shipmaster, it is the speed of the round that will do the damage for

us. A bolt-shell travelling at that speed could demolish a battleship.'

'*It is evident that you have thought carefully on this, brother,*' said Alcuis. His brow knotted. '*It could work…*'

'The fleet will split. All ships will begin to reduce speed as soon as this conference is done. The *Glorious Nova* will decelerate to planetary assault velocity.'

'*Then you will be seen,*' said Marcellus.

'Falling behind the main body of our vessels will hide our slower approach. By the time we are in visual range, you will be among them. Relative fleet velocities are in the detailed orders I have transmitted to each of you, but we will arrive six hours after the main body. Your role is to engage and divert the larger part of the enemy ships in orbit. With the foe occupied, we will effect a landing here.'

A light blinked on an area of forest some kilometres away from the mountain.

'This is sufficient distance from Sothopolis and the mountain to avoid the bulk of the enemy. There are unlikely to be patrols in force here.'

'*Will they not spot and catch you, brother?*' said Palaearch. '*Theoretical – you are detected. Forward assault elements will engage within half an hour. Your advance will become mired.*'

'There is a tunnel. Dantioch assured me it would be left open for our use.' A red mark flashed on the map.

'*There is a problem with your plan, brother Ultramarine, that will arise before that mentioned by Palaearch*,' said Alcuis. '*The* Glorious Nova *will be at risk while you land. If you are destroyed all this will be for nothing.*'

'I trust to the speed of our engines and the skill of my shipmaster. I would not order another to follow us.'

'*Then I will volunteer*,' said Alcuis. '*I will come with you. We shall hold off the Night Lords while you land. Then both ships can retreat together.*'

'I cannot allow you to do so. The predictive theoreticals for a covering ship offer a poor prognosis. The Night Lords will respond to two ships with greater force. Your vessel will be destroyed, and you and your men will perish.'

'*And how good are they for your ship without support? You say you will not order one of your own to take on this role,*' said Alcuis. '*I will do this duty.*'

'Captain Alcuis, that is a noble offer. I cannot allow it.'

'*I am your equal in rank and of a different Legion. You cannot order me, captain. We of the First will fight when and as we see fit. I see fit to do so now.*'

Corvo's face set. 'Then you have my thanks.' He returned to his holographic map. 'I shall lead my veterans into Mount Pharos. We strike here.' Mission critical icons blinked within the mountain. 'Primary Location Alpha, in a cavern at the peak of Sotha, is the control

centre for the beacon.' The image zoomed in on a graphical representation of the cave. 'The Night Lords will concentrate their efforts here, it is the obvious target. But it is Primary Location Ultra, the site of the devices' quantum engines deep within the mountain, that is the weak point of the Sothan operation.'

He took a deep breath. The weight of what he was about to say was apparent.

'Dantioch told me that in the event of the Pharos falling into enemy hands, the machines of the Mechanicum must be destroyed. The device itself will be undamaged, but without the intermediary control systems, the xenos engines that power the beacon cannot be directed. If we are successful in removing these, the Night Lords will not be able access any of the beacon's functions. The rest of the fleet will then return from its diversionary action, and effect a landing. We shall engage the Night Lords in orbit and on the ground, with as many of our number as possible breaking into the mountain in an attempt to occupy the enemy until Lord Guilliman arrives from Macragge. It is the best chance of achieving both our goals. The only chance, perhaps. In the worst theoretical, we must position ourselves to destroy the Pharos.'

'*And we will die doing it,*' said Alcuis.

'If needs be,' said Corvo, 'then so be it. Our opportunity for victory is slender, but there is only us. No one else.'

'*We march for Macragge,*' said the others.

Corvo turned then to a detailed breakdown of the fleet action, and plans for the rest of the force to make planetfall. Further theoreticals followed, one to cover every eventuality, including one for his own survival, unlikely though it was.

The sons of Roboute Guilliman were thorough in all things.

TWENTY-SIX

First Captain
Momentum
Planetfall

Krukesh cast his eyes over Magna Macragge Civitas, spying upon its inhabitants through the Pharos. Already he had mastered its focusing. Full of confidence, he pushed hard to unlock its secrets. The warsmith was an unwilling yet useful resource. Polux hung from a cross with their other captives, and he had proved a most useful lever. Skraivok had had the pleasure of using his knife on the Imperial Fist – not too much, just enough to keep Dantioch's mind on his job. He had ordered Kellenkir to hurt the others more seriously, a little demonstration to the warsmith of what awaited Polux if he felt in the mood for defiance. Skraivok enjoyed the work. It had been a while since he got his hands truly bloody.

'The Lion's men, the Angel and Guilliman, such a happy family. Horus would reward us well for this information,' Skraivok said neutrally, wary of sharing the daemon's revelation directly. 'If the Lion's men are there, I wonder too if our Lord Curze is nearby?'

'Why would he be?'

'After the battle at Tsagualsa, Night Haunter threw the *Nightfall* at the Dark Angels command ship when he made to attack the Lion again. If he survived, is he there, I wonder? Is he a prisoner? Is he dead?'

'We would know if he were dead,' said Krukesh. 'Our psykers would have sensed it. Speaking of psykers, dear Gendor, where is yours?' said Krukesh.

'Perhaps the machine can show us where our father is,' said Skraivok, evading the question. Berenon was gone, and the sword that had arisen from his remains he had gifted to Kellenkir. Gingerly. He had not touched it himself. To his glee, Kellenkir had been very pleased with the gift.

'Probably,' said Krukesh. He moved the view over the city, taking in the reinforced defences, the large numbers of men under arms. A pale shape in the sky took his attention, and he focused upon it. A wrecked battleship, floating as serenely as a moon.

'Then search for him!' said Skraivok when Krukesh made no move to do so. 'We must find the Night Haunter.' The others were quiet, but they wanted to find Curze as much as he did. He could feel it.

'Why? Why should we look for him? He was always a distant and disapproving father,' said Krukesh. 'Insane, by any measure of sanity. If I find him, what then? Do we seek to gather the Legion only to throw it away freeing him from whatever trap he has cast himself into? Do we spill our blood to bring him back, then grovel at his feet and suffer his loathing? I say no. I am not Sevatar, to go following him like a beaten cur. He hates us, he abandoned us, Skraivok, and for me at least the feeling is mutual. I will not look for

him, because I do not want to find him. I will not set our brothers upon that path.'

'And what do the Atramentar have to say of it?' said Skraivok. He looked to Krukesh's Terminator bodyguard. They were Curze's enforcers, loyal to Sevatar, but they made no reaction.

'They have been convinced,' said Krukesh. 'Times are not what they were. They are mine now.'

'What path would you rather, then, my brother?' said Skraivok acidly.

'Let's look for another of our exalted leaders instead, shall we?' said Krukesh. 'Barabas, refocus the machine.' He looked pointedly at Polux, chained to the torture frame. 'Do you require me to refocus your attention also?'

'No, my lord,' said Dantioch. He moved over his machines. Skraivok watched him closely. Krukesh paid the warsmith little attention, but to Skraivok's eye he did not seem to be doing very much.

'Show me more. Show me Sevatar.'

The machine responded, the distant quantum-pulse engines grinding with effort.

The vista of Magna Macragge Civitas vanished. A dark chamber took its place – a maximum security holding cell, with one naked occupant. A mean amount of light lit the thick walls of adamantium bounding the circular floor. They were flawless, offering no handhold, the circumference of the tube too wide for a man to brace himself against.

The occupant was a Space Marine, Nostraman at that, with the pale skin of all their kind. A metal gag circled the lower part of his face. About his neck was a collar. His arms were manacled behind him. Multiple chains ran from his bindings to hooks set in the floor, four from his collar alone. He was forced into a crouch that must have been agonising to hold. His hair was unkempt, half hanging over a face that was spattered with clots of dried blood.

There was no mistaking who it was.

Sevatar was facing away from the viewing stage but as the cell came into focus, Skraivok saw him stiffen.

'Delightful!' said Krukesh, stepping forward. As he did so there was some shift in the atmosphere, and a draught of freezing air blew from the image. Skraivok watched Dantioch closely. Again, he did not seem to be doing much of anything but passing his hands over buttons and dials.

Krukesh went to stand directly behind the chained Space Marine. Sevatar struggled to turn, but was held fast.

'Ah, Sevatar, how the mighty are fallen. Do you see, Atramentar, how lowly your leader has become? Are you not glad you follow me? I would not allow myself to be captured so. But then I would never abandon you as he has.'

Skraivok expected a reaction to this provocation, but the Terminators remained

motionless.

Krukesh stepped around in front of Sevatar so that he might look his lord and rival in the face. The Night Lords in the room moved forward in disbelief.

‘Warsmith, what is the meaning of this?’ asked Skraivok. ‘How can he be within the room?’

Dantioch bobbed his head humbly. Skraivok felt nothing but contempt for him. Iron Within, Iron Without indeed. He was as weak as any mortal, his resolve crumbling as soon as his friend was threatened.

‘An illusion. The environment projected by the Pharos is three-dimensional, but it is not real. No technology has such power.’

‘I wonder where you are, Sevatar?’ Krukesh said. ‘It appears you are in something of a bind!’ He laughed at his own humour. ‘If only we could locate you, then we might consider rescuing you. As things stand, we instead require a new leader. I was thinking of putting myself forward. Do you think you might give me your blessing?’

Sevatar jerked in his chains. The line of his scar crept above his gag, suggesting he was attempting to speak, but he could make no sound, and stared balefully at Krukesh. Skraivok felt an anger then, one that was not his own, but which overlaid his own emotions in a greasy, eerie manner. It was Sevatar’s anger he could feel, transmitted by the device. As he realised this, he felt Krukesh’s triumph also.

‘No? Such a shame.’ Krukesh grinned mockingly. ‘I will be sure to tell the others you are alive when I reassemble the fleet.’ He reached out a hand to Sevatar’s face, then snatched it back in puzzlement.

Quickly the Kyroptera strode out from the cell, and it faded into the black rock of the chamber walls once again. He went straight for Dantioch, and seized his masked face in both hands.

‘Tell me, warsmith. What other uses does this machine possess?’ He was excited and angry, his words hard and urgent.

‘None but what you have seen!’ said Dantioch. ‘It is a beacon and a communications device, that it all.’

‘What were you focusing it upon when we arrived?’

‘We were speaking with those who will destroy you,’ said Dantioch calmly.

‘There are no uses in transport, no ability to transmit matter as well as data?’ Krukesh squeezed at Dantioch’s head, his knuckles whitening. The metal of Dantioch’s mask creaked under pressure.

‘None!’ spat the warsmith. ‘Now release me, or you shall know nothing of any of its secrets.’

‘Lies, lies, lies!’ roared Krukesh. He threw the warsmith backwards into the bank of Mechanicum machines. Dantioch cried out as the impact jarred his ruined body. Krukesh

walked over to him and kicked him in his crippled leg, and the warsmith fell hard.

'Do not lie! I touched him. I felt Sevatar's flesh under my gauntlet. I was there. I was in his cell with him.'

'Impossible,' groaned Dantioch. He attempted to rise. Krukesh kicked him to the floor again.

'Lies!'

'Interstellar teleportation?' said Skraivok.

'Yes,' said Krukesh. He glared at the warsmith. 'That is what it is, isn't it, Dantioch? You lie to me again! For that we shall hurt your friend, and kill one other.'

Before Krukesh could give the order, Skraivok interrupted.

'If you will not attempt to search for Curze, we must free Sevatar. He's the only one of us who can hold the Legion together.'

'No,' said Krukesh. 'He has earned what he has.'

'Without Night Haunter or Sevatar, we risk dissolution. We will collapse into warring parties, and the Legion will die.'

'We will not.' Krukesh waved two of his men forward. They helped Dantioch to his feet. 'We know where the others are. Let us contact them, set a new rendezvous and bring the Legion together. Then we shall seek out Horus and rejoin his war! Claw masters, prepare your men to return to their ships. This is a pretty toy, but we shall soon have had all we need from it.'

'They will not follow you, Krukesh,' said Skraivok. 'You exceed your authority.'

'We shall see,' said Krukesh, 'when I am giving orders from the bridge of the *Nightfall* itself. I will take the ship, and with it, command of the Legion. Warsmith, you will prepare your Pharos to focus upon the *Nightfall*, maximum power.'

'I cannot do as you ask!' said Dantioch. 'I do not know where your flagship is. The calibration of the device takes time.'

'Then why did it find Sevatar so readily? You are lying to me, warsmith. Perhaps your usefulness is over.'

'I speak the truth! The battle has damaged the chambers it relies on to function. If we had weeks, then–'

A Night Lord ran into Primary Location Alpha from the promontory, one of the men who had taken the Lightkeepers' place in the Emperor's Watch.

'My lord! My lord Krukesh!' he shouted. 'News from the fleet.'

'Speak.'

'An attack. Imperial ships coming at us at speed. The Ultramarines are here!'

'Our time is running out,' said Skraivok.

‘We will destroy them. Contact my ship. Have the platform’s cyclonic torpedoes target the Pharos. If they triumph, we will leave them nothing but a smoking ruin, as I deduce was Guilliman’s original intent. How delightfully ironic to fulfil his wish for him. Warsmith, I will not ask you again. You will find me the *Nightfall*, and send me there. If you refuse,’ he turned and pointed at the bound Polux, ‘I will take your friend’s eyes and tongue.’

The preceding spread of solid-mass fire took the Night Lords fleet by surprise. Two of their ships were atomised as munitions travelling a substantial portion of the speed of light slammed into them. Others were crippled, left floating in high anchor over Sotha and restricting the manoeuvrability of those craft left undamaged. A form of panic gripped the Night Lords fleet, as the vessels searched the skies for an enemy they had not anticipated. No Imperial or known xenos craft travelled so swiftly; by all measures of contemporary combat doctrine, Corvo came from nowhere.

The fleet came soon after the first spread of weapons fire, keeping a wide margin between themselves and the Night Lords’ anchorage. They fired again as they passed, still decelerating. They went too swiftly for most of their enemy to formulate firing patterns and loose their weapons. Some did anyway, casting hot slugs of metal and beams of light into the vastness of space in the hope of a hit. A second return volley from the Ultramarines did less damage, but the intention was not destruction, but provocation. Neither side scored any appreciable damage on their enemy during that exchange.

Then the loyalist fleet was past, leaving the Night Lords reeling.

Aboard the command deck of the *Glorious Nova*, Lucretius Corvo watched his initial gambit play out through information already minutes old by the time he received it. No forward psychic scrying had been successful, and he had to rely upon the ship’s augurs. Every decision he must make now was constrained by the sluggish nature of light. He watched tensely, counting energy spikes and visible light flares indicative of hull breaches on the enemy side. Corvo peered into the past, helpless to change it, and gambling his own future on the unknowable present caught invisibly between.

A cheer went up across the battered command deck as an angry gabble of vox-traffic blared across the void. One third of the Night Lords ships slipped anchor and pursued their attackers.

Corvo scrutinised the information tumbling across the tactical screens and holo-projectors. The attack had gone to plan. Several bright ionisation trails crossed the planet’s atmosphere where stray projectiles had burned up. The amount of energy they had imparted to the atmosphere would have stirred up some mighty storms, but that was rather to his advantage. None had impacted on the surface. So far as he could tell, the *Glorious Nova* and the *Watcher* had not been detected.

Now came the difficult part.

‘Strike force, to the embarkation decks. We ready for planetary insertion.’

Corvo conferred with his newly-appointed shipmaster, cast one last critical look over all

the other main stations of the deck. Much of the damage from the Pharos cut-out had yet to be repaired, and the ship was running through a patchwork of auxiliary systems and hastily installed workarounds. But the *Glorious Nova* sailed true. Corvo was a good commander, well respected for his grasp of naval combat and the close-quarter brutality of man-to-man void war. Where he saw minor faults in the work of his staff, he let them go. Better they have confidence in their abilities than they hesitate while he effected his landing.

He was tense as he exited the conveyor running down the command spire to the drop assault platforms.

Drop pods waited with their leaf-doors down, their angular heads gripped in loading claws. Servitors, Mechanicum adepts and human deck crew in the uniforms of Ultramar's navy prepared the launch tubes. Several of the pods were to be sent out empty of legionaries, and loaded with supplies. There would be a limited amount the taskforce could carry, and no space for armour spares or replacement weapons. Such infiltration roles presented problems to power-armoured warriors that lighter units did not face.

Corvo's own calculations suggested they would have barely enough. They would have to loot their enemy's equipment to maintain combat effectiveness if their battle lasted longer than three or four days. Wars were won by strategy and logistics, rarely by decisive blows. But he must focus now. Success in battle came one practical at a time.

His men waited at attention, arrayed in perfect ranks, their wargear immaculate. Crisp oath papers fluttered from the pauldrons of many.

Three squads represented his finest veterans. They had taken to wearing Corvo's quartered livery of bone and blue on their pauldrons.

Once his men's adoption of his colours would have been frowned upon. When he had taken his warriors to task for their actions, they had said that he was the hero of Astagar, the bearer of the Laurel of Defiance, honoured by Guilliman himself, and that they sought only to honour him in their turn. Corvo disliked it, but he allowed the practice to continue. To censure his legionaries for their respect would have been an insult.

The rest of the units standing before him wore the standard blue of the Legion. All were capable warriors, with four squads of fifteen outfitted for a flexible tactical role.

Two squads of support legionaries rounded out his taskforce. He brought few heavy weapons. Even equipped with suspensor units to take their weight down they remained bulky, and would be difficult to bring through the dense woodland of Sotha. He had ordered many flamers and meltaguns to be brought in the stead of more of the heavier guns. Short-ranged and deadly, they were ideal for the task ahead of them.

There were one hundred twenty-six, all in all. Perhaps too many, perhaps too few. There had to be enough to drive through to the quantum engine room of Primary Location Ultra, but not so many that they were too soon noticed and annihilated.

Corvo had no time for pretty speeches. His men expected none.

'Activate mission chronos. Mark of Sotha to commence… *now*.' The chronometer

chimed in his helmet and began its count.

He spent a brief moment surveying his troops. He knew them all, they were his brothers, and all were worthy. ‘We march for Macragge. To your drop pods.’

They turned and stamped their feet. The boom of it drowned out the racket of mission preparation. One squad at a time they boarded their drop pods. The doors squealed up. Atmospheric seals hissed. Before the last squads were aboard, the first pods were being hoisted upwards by clanking loading cranes that bleated out doleful alarms as they slid slowly across their ceiling tracks. More and more mechanical voices joined the choir, until the blare of warning klaxons filled the metal world of the deck.

Corvo watched the first pod brought into position. The round doors of the tube slid aside, and it was lowered into place. He waited until its top fins had disappeared out of sight and the crane was withdrawn before he motioned to his command squad that they should join him in theirs.

He was in first, pulling down his drop cradle while his men secured their specialist gear in adapted crew bays. They were as taciturn as their leader in the main. Brothers Gollodon and Cerean shared a joke with one another by the look of it, but they were mindful of their captain’s character, and kept their chatter private.

The drop pod lurched upward. Corvo brought up a feed from the command deck in his visor. He was occupied by it, and hardly registered the doors of the drop pod lifting and closing him in. His world became one picked out by machine lights, the steady blinking of good function, the reflected ruby shine of his own eye-lenses on the door interior. To see his fellows, he must turn his head sharply to one side, and even then he gained only an impression of their presence. He cut into their vox-feeds. Apothecary Hephtus was working through a verbal checklist, his pre-battle ritual. Gollodon and Cerean were still talking to one another. The others, his vox-operator Bellephon and Vexillary Damius, were silent.

‘Sound off,’ he said.

One after the other they spoke their name and rank. Corvo checked his squad network, bringing up their vital signs and checking through the status of their equipment and ammunition counts.

The drop pod swayed to a halt.

‘Crassus, give me your status,’ he said.

‘*Yes, captain,*’ said Crassus, transferring the data to the network. He was one of the few sergeants to have been with Corvo on Astagar. So many had died, others of his men had moved on, transferred to other companies to fill ranks depleted by war. Crassus remained doggedly by his side. Corvo fully expected him to succeed him as captain of the 90th one day.

Corvo linked to each of the other sergeants in the strike force in order of seniority. As he expected, all was satisfactory.

The drop pod banged twice, its sideways motion stilled. With a jerk it descended. A steady rasping whispered through the hull as it was lowered into the tube.

'These deck crew need better training,' said Gollodon. 'I had this pod painted yesterday.'

They all laughed. The pod's livery would be scorched nearly bare in the descent. Corvo did not join them. He was observing the situation outside. His view of the coming clash was reduced to the most rudimentary graphical representation on the limited space offered by his helm display – green arrowheads for his own fleet, red for the enemy. Both were heading off from the planet, already some way out from Sotha. Many more were still present around the dim blue circle denoting the world. Three red arrows were headed toward the *Glorious Nova*, the green arrow of Alcuis' *Watcher* moving off to intercept.

The drop launch officer spoke over the vox. '*Thirty seconds to drop.*'

Red emergency lighting came on in the pod. A soft chime counted out the seconds. Corvo watched as Alcuis' ship flew straight at the intercepting Night Lords ships. He brought up tiny data screeds. All three of the enemy's ships were individually a match for the *Watcher*, and four more, smaller ships were coming over the pole of Sotha, down on the *Watcher*'s position.

At times like these, Corvo wished there were a god to pray to. A miracle was required to save the Dark Angels ship.

But thus far, its sacrificial run was working. Only one ship was making for the *Glorious Nova*, and it was far astern.

All Corvo had to do was survive the drop.

The chimes ended with a long, musical blurt.

'*Pod zero-one, release,*' said the launch officer.

The bottom fell out of Corvo's world as the pod's dorsal engine roared, shooting them out of the tube. His spine pressed against the base of his skull, his stomach pushed up into his throat.

Freefall through the void lasted seconds. Then their vessel bumped loudly, and the roar of atmospheric friction thundered through the pod.

Every time Corvo had undertaken a drop assault, from the very first training drop, there was a chance he would not survive the experience. Drop failure was a small but ever-present risk. The enemy were often firing at him. That was not the case now – their attack was coming in well away from Sothopolis' guns, if they still existed – but the *Glorious Nova* was going so fast they were being deployed at the absolute limit of the drop pods' operating tolerance. The odds of a catastrophic break-up were higher than usual.

The descent was rough for two-thirds of the way. Taking into account the bone-crushing forces involved, that was not an insignificant discomfort. Corvo's brain felt as if it would be bashed to pieces on the inside of his skull. The pod rattled them about like dice in a tin. A smooth portion followed, giving Corvo a second to see that his feed with the *Glorious Nova* had cut out, and that a new signal pulsed insistently in the lower quadrant of his

visor. This was the locator beacon of Dantioch's people. The pod jerked as its limited thrusters nudged it onto an intercept course.

Moments before impact, the main jet fired. The pod slowed from speeds that were fatal to those that were simply injurious. The craft crashed down into the earth with bone-jarring force. The doors blew open sufficiently hard to flatten anything outside, and the pale grey light of predawn and a sweet alien air tainted with smoke flooded the compartment. Corvo's harness slammed up, and then he was running outside.

Two pods were down already and his men were forming a perimeter. Whooshing roars and loud thumps announced the arrival of more. Trees cracked like whips as their trunks splintered under the weight of smoky re-entry vehicles. Fitful burning had taken hold in the rudely created clearing, but there was far more smoke on the air than their landing could have accounted for.

Corvo risked a brief vox-ping with his ship, but got no reply. He scanned the skies. The blazing artificial starfires of low-orbit battle showed him the location of the *Watcher*. He looked to the east and was relieved to see a glowing delta of air, the hull of his own starship scraping the upper atmosphere as it made good its escape. Bright shapes chased it, but they would not catch it.

The *Watcher* was another matter. Green aurorae like summer lightning flickered across the sky, the tell-tale of collapsing void shields at the edge of the atmospheric envelope. The fire between the ships increased.

A brilliant orb appeared above, bathing Sotha in a premature dawn. It shrank a little, then burst outward, more brightly. A new sun shone in the heavens, bringing brief noon to the morning.

Fiery debris fell away as the light contracted to nothing. The *Watcher* was gone. Alcuis was dead. He had died in the service of the Imperium, going to his doom knowingly and without complaint. There were those in the Ultramarines who mistrusted the secretive Dark Angels. Corvo would speak out against such opinions wherever he heard them, forevermore.

The last pod thumped down. All of them had made it intact. There were no losses among his own men.

'We owe the First Legion a debt of honour,' he voxed. 'Let the Nova Company ever remember it.'

The locator beacon pinged urgently, a kilometre away.

'They will come to us soon. Move out,' he said.

They ran through a thick forest. Their armour forced a path through the spongy, densely packed trees but in places the vegetation caught them as surely as a net, and Corvo's progress was not so swift as he had hoped. The beacon sang, twenty metres, ten metres, then it stopped.

The ground rose. Corvo advanced quickly. The environment made stealth impossible,

and he burst unexpectedly out of the trees into a clearing at the top with a racket that made him wince.

The top of the hill was bald. In the lee of a rock covered in thick orange moss, a scruffy-looking auxiliary trooper waited.

Corvo levelled his gun. ‘In ultimate sacrifice…’

‘…is ultimate glory,’ the man responded. He was battle-worn, dirty, covered in sooty smears. ‘Not my choice of countersign, but I’m no Space Marine.’ He smiled widely. It vanished when Corvo did not lower his gun. He took in the captain’s great height.

‘Big and serious. My, you and Captain Polux are going to get on so well.’

‘Who are you?’ said Corvo. His men had surrounded the trooper. Others moved on, securing the base of the hill.

‘Sergeant Mericus, the Sothan Irregular Auxilia. Do you think you could move a little more quietly? You’re as clumsy as mating phantines, the lot of you.’ He was insolent, this one, but nervous. Corvo still did not lower his gun.

‘You are to lead us on your own to the Pharos?’

‘No,’ said the man. A red sighting dot appeared on Corvo’s chest, more on his lead men. The moss atop the rock moved. A Legion Scout emerged, his aim never wavering.

‘This is Acting Scout-Sergeant Oberdeii and his brothers from the Hundred and Ninety-Ninth Aegida Company. It’s him who’ll be your guide through the tunnels.’

The sighting lasers blinked off.

The scruffy man turned his back and sauntered off down the hill. He moved through the dense shrubs covering the hill top silently. Shortly before disappearing into the trees he turned back and winked. ‘It’s this way. My men are waiting near the tunnel entrance, don’t worry, not too near. We’re not stupid. We won’t give it away. Try to be a bit quieter though, or they might shoot you.’

The Scout Oberdeii came over to the captain. He shouldered his sniper rifle and snapped a salute. ‘My lord Captain Lucretius Corvo, it is an honour to serve you in this duty.’ He looked over his shoulder to where Mericus had gone. ‘Do not be offended by Sergeant Giraldus. He means no disrespect.’ Oberdeii paused, rethinking his words. ‘Well, he does. He is not a warrior. Everything is like a game to him, but he is a good man.’

‘How close are you to brotherhood, neophyte?’

‘Final stage selection, captain,’ said Oberdeii sadly, then a spark of defiance entered his face. ‘But we stand firm in spite of our youth. We have proved our mettle against the Eighth Legion.’

‘I meant no ill by it, Scout. More information leads to more viable theoreticals, even if seemingly insignificant. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘You have done well. Now, lead the way. Your human companion has given us the slip.’

Oberdeii motioned for his remaining Scouts to form up, assigning them to sub-groups of Corvo’s strike force in case they became separated.

They came around the stones on top of the hill, and Corvo saw where the smoke was coming from.

All around Mount Pharos, the forests were burning.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Forest fire
The courage of shepherds
Into the labyrinth

Flights of gunships roared over the mountain, dropping promethium bombs that kindled blazes even in the wet wood of the quicktrees. Teardrops of blackened forest limned by fire crawled along before the wind.

'You are still offering resistance,' stated Corvo.

Mericus was surprised by Corvo's words. The captain had said very little to him. Everyone was preoccupied nervously watching the trees.

'Yeah. Yeah, we are. The situation isn't quite so bad as it looks from the outside, maybe. They've taken the top of the mountain, but the lower chambers are still ours, and we're operating out of some of the more obscure caves.'

Corvo's helm swept back and forth as he examined the mountain battlefield. 'It cannot last.'

'You're right,' said Mericus. 'It can't.'

'You are remarkably relaxed.'

'You expect me to be gibbering in terror?' Mericus snorted. 'We're not all cowards. Damn few of us are. These men here,' he waved his hand back at his depleted command. 'They've been fighting hard. They've killed a few of you legionaries, do you know that? They're braver than your lot, if you ask me.'

'They fear, and they conquer it,' said Corvo. 'That is worthy of respect.'

'But they're not frightened, they're terrified, captain. They know what the Night Lords will do to us if they catch us. We know the stakes, but we won't give up. None of us expect to live very long.'

They took to a phantine road, a track of smooth earth smashed through the trees by the great beasts and pounded rock hard by generations in their passing. The quicktrees were not entirely defeated and curved over the way, enclosing it in a tunnel of green.

'We'll go quicker here, and we'll be harder to track,' said Mericus.

'This is not a human path,' said Corvo. 'What manner of animal made it?'

'Big ones,' said Mericus. 'This area's far out from the city, and thick with them any other time, but they've been driven off by the fighting. Be glad of it. They're short-tempered.'

On the road, the going was easier. Out of the woods the disparity between the Space Marines' and the Sothans' ability to march became apparent. Mericus sensed the frustration of the Space Marines at having to move at a human pace, but they did not

abandon the Sothans. Mericus wondered if such mercy would cost them the war in the end.

Soon they were climbing the mountain's foothills through choking spirals of smoke. They left the road and the danger from the fires grew. It was only the blindest chance that did not see the men obliterated directly by the fires creeping through the forest. Several times they had to alter their route to avoid the conflagration. They could see very little, and the auxiliaries struggled to breathe in the fumes rolling out of the burning woods. Quicktree wood was wet and did not readily combust, and the smoke it put out when it did was thick and white with steam. Ash drifted down, grey and white and black, thick as drifting snow in places.

Presently, Oberdeii called a halt in a clearing before a point where the hillside reared up, its gentle slope becoming precipitous where a cliff tore through the ground. The rock of it was covered in vegetation, and Mericus could see nothing on its eroded face except dark green foliage and the occasional patch of mossy stone, but his men were pointing out something in the leaves.

'The triple cave,' said Hasquin. 'The furthest entrance into the mountain that's been found. Back in the old days, before the city, the further herders used it as shelter. Phantines wouldn't go near it.'

'I don't see anything,' said Mericus. The cliff was so choked in swiftvine it resembled a hoary old face, a forest god out of time, rather than a rock formation.

'There,' said Hasquin. He rested his arm on Mericus' shoulder and pointed out three darker patches set at staggered intervals in the vines. Mericus squinted.

'You move well, sarge,' said Tiny Jonno, 'but you gotta be Sothan born to see the caves in the trees here.'

'Ain't that the truth,' said Dorican. He and Chelvan set down *Domitia*. The day was hot, the fires made it hotter. They were streaming with sweat, but they had not complained at the weight of their gun.

'This is our way in,' said Corvo. 'Sergeant–'

'Yeah, I know,' said Mericus. 'You need to leave us behind. We're slowing you down.'

Corvo's expression was hidden by his helmet, but he bowed slightly in the affirmative.

'I advise you to scatter. Head upwards. The Night Lords will be following us by now, and they will catch you if you linger nearby.'

'We've nowhere to go, not really. What if you fail?' said Mericus.

'We may, but it is not your concern. You have played your part. Depart with your lives,' said Corvo.

'We can do better than run off and hide and wait to die, burned up or hauled off,' said Mericus. 'We'll cover you, buy you some time. We're tough to spot from the air, but you – no offence – once they find your drop pods, the trail you left will be all too easy to follow.

I thought quicktrees were pretty robust, but you've made a sight of a mess.'

Corvo made a disapproving noise that came out of his vox-grille as a metallic buzz. 'It is not necessary for you to risk your lives.'

'Oh, but it is,' said Mericus. 'This beacon, it's a big thing. The fate of the galaxy, all that, but this is about more than the end of the universe for us, this is our home.'

'You are a very flippant man.'

'Thanks,' said Mericus.

'I did not mean it as a compliment.'

'I know. It's just the way I am. I wasn't born here, captain, but this is where I belong. We'll fight for Sotha, we'll fight for our home.'

The Sothans formed up behind Mericus, the remains of the three squads that had set out on patrol what seemed like a hundred years ago. Hasquin, Chelvan, Dorican, his dour persona unruffled by the conflict. Pontian was dead, Morio still wounded and succumbing to infection, Hanspire gone, most of Bolarion's men too. Govenisk was with them, but had withdrawn into himself, relinquishing all authority to Mericus. Vitellius lived, cooped up in the mountain with the three of his men who knew the passageways best.

There were fourteen of them with Mericus, that was all. Men who expected to do their yearly tour of duty then go back to their jobs and families. Their uniforms were so dirty that the original colours were unidentifiable, and their faces weren't much cleaner. They were a ragged tribe in the face of the Ultramarines captain in his pristine armour.

But they stood tall, and proud.

'So we'll stay here, thank you very much,' said Mericus, 'and do what we can.'

'I acknowledge your previous efforts, but a large force will come after us, not a patrol, or a handful caught by surprise. Your weapons are not well suited to fighting the Legiones Astartes,' said Corvo. 'Your courage is praiseworthy, but you would serve better by fleeing and living to fight under better circumstances.'

'These torches?' Mericus touched the stock of his lasrifle. 'They're not the best, but they'll still put a Night Lord down if you hit him enough times in the right places. And you are forgetting *Domitia* and her sisters. We still have them.'

He pointed at Dorican, who slapped the side of his heavy bolter emphatically.

'Three heavy bolters will make them stop and think,' said Mericus.

'We are the shepherds of Sotha. They will never see us,' said Hasquin. 'Not until it's too late.'

'These crags are a good position for an ambush, you reckon, Mericus?' said Govenisk. He pointed to a vine-choked shelf about halfway up. 'Their firing angles will be poor, we'll be difficult to get at. We should take a fair tally of them.'

Oberdeii, who had been waiting by the side of the captain, bent low and scooped up a

large rock. He tossed it without effort to where Govenisk pointed.

'Imagine that is a grenade. You have to get higher,' he said.

'We can get higher,' said Mericus.

'With heavy bolters?' said Oberdeii sceptically. 'Listen to the captain, please. Hide somewhere, do not throw your lives away. That's sheer rock. One of your quarians might do it, but can you?'

Mericus grinned solemnly. 'Where a quarian can go, a Sothan can go. And where a Sothan can go, he can drag a gun.'

The last of the Space Marines came through the cave entrance. The swiftvines creaked shut behind them, cutting what little light came inside to a murky green.

Tolomachus and Solon took five men each into the other caves and had them stamp about in the leafmould. As was the norm with the tunnels of the Pharos, debris from the outside world gave out dramatically quickly, and the treated black stone that made up the tunnels was impervious to the Space Marines' ceramite boots. With false trails laid, it would take more than a cursory examination for the Night Lords to discern which way they had gone.

The three tunnels, despite their outward similarity, were different in character. The lowest went on for a kilometre before curving down at a sharp angle to become a tubular pit a hundred metres deep. Solon had been on the mapping expedition for that one, lowered down on ropes to find it terminating in a perfect bowl of black stone. The upper tunnel wound its way on random curves for thousands of metres, twisting back upon itself twice, before abruptly narrowing into three tiny apertures that went off in different directions.

The middle tunnel went straight on towards the mountain and the Pharos, joining with the main system there.

Corvo's strike force went far enough that they were all within. Oberdeii was at the head with Corvo and Tebecai. He glanced back at the green curtain of the entrance, wishing he were back outside.

'This is the way, Captain Corvo,' said Oberdeii. At the thought of going back into the tunnels, his voice quavered, and he cursed himself inwardly.

'Tell me what to expect.'

'The tunnels are extensive, and mostly unknown. We had mapped maybe ten per cent reliably before the invasion, at least so Magos Carantine told me, captain.'

'Reliably?'

'Getting accurate readings is hard. And they don't always… They don't always seem to be the same, my lord,' said Tebecai.

Corvo grunted. He had evidently seen stranger things in his time.

'This tunnel is the furthest out from the mountain,' said Tebecai. 'It's about twenty kilometres to the main chambers at the centre. It's not bad going to begin with – perfectly

level for the first three kilometres, but it branches at the mountain and the path we need takes on gradient. It's shallow at first, but increases in steepness.' He muttered under his breath. 'Or it did the last time we looked.'

'I take it these caverns are not simply caverns, neophyte,' said Corvo.

Oberdeii drew in a shaking breath. 'Captain, we had an incident here. I… Well…'

'The Lion himself ordered us not to speak of it,' said Tebecai, finishing the sentence for him.

'Then do not,' Corvo said with a respectful nod.

Oberdeii relaxed a little. 'The upper levels have walkways put in by Warsmith Dantioch and the Mechanicum teams. The major tunnels of the lower complex have them too – those that lead to locations that have a direct bearing on the functioning of the Pharos.' Oberdeii parroted words spoken him by Arkus long months ago, before they began the mapping initiative. It comforted him to be repeating information from before, when life was secure. 'The material of the tunnels has some odd properties.'

'Such as?' asked Corvo.

'Light absorption, and at sunset and sunrise, light emission,' said Oberdeii.

'Lord Dantioch calls it the light event, but the Sothans call it the light song,' said Tebecai. 'For a few seconds the tunnels fill with golden light.'

'Noted. That will stand to our advantage. The Night Lords dislike bright light.'

'The main–'

Corvo held up his hand. 'The others have returned. It is time to move on. Continue your explanation as we march, neophyte. Column! Double pace. Support squads to the rear.'

Corvo set off at a lope, his long legs eating up distance. Oberdeii cast a final look behind him. Now the Sothans were no longer with them, the column of Space Marines went faster.

'There are steep slopes and sudden drops, and it is hard to maintain purchase in those places,' continued Oberdeii. 'We must remain on the path – if we leave it we will become lost. The walls baffle auspex and most other scanning techniques.'

'So you had to map it all manually?' said Corvo. His speech came easily from his vox-grille. The pace they went was achievable for the Scouts, but they panted as they ran. Corvo did not.

Tebecai gave Oberdeii a sidelong glance. 'My lord, this a strange mountain.'

The tunnel closed in around them, fluidly organic, like the tubule in an organ of an unimaginable creature. The light from the mouth dwindled away to a grey-green suggestion. The weight of stone and years pressed hard on Oberdeii.

The tunnel widened. Two apertures presented themselves, the left an extreme, horizontal ellipse, the right a tall circle.

Oberdeii slowed, and stopped. The column following him and Tebecai did the same. He looked into the darkness of the cave. Something deep down looked back into him.

And they shall know no fear.

He took a hesitant step forward.

And they shall know no fear! The voice in his mind became hysterical, a parody of the recordings of the Emperor.

I am not afraid, he told himself. *I am not afraid.*

But he was afraid, and he should not be. He was not afraid of the Night Lords, or dying, or fighting. He was afraid of the deep cold under the earth, he was afraid of the endless turns and twists of the tunnels. He was afraid of the great machine, still impossibly functioning after millions of years. He was afraid of the things he heard whispering from the shadows. He was afraid of the revelations that waited for him, eager to spill more of the universe's boundless horrors into his mind…

But most of all, he was afraid of the dark.

'Is there a problem, neophyte? Have you lost your way?' asked Corvo.

'No,' he said. 'I have not. It is the right-hand branch. It will take us deep into the mountain, past Primary Location Beta, and on towards the quantum engines.'

'Then proceed.'

'Yes, Captain Corvo.'

They shall know no fear.

The Emperor's words echoing in his mind, Oberdeii choked down his unease. He stepped out of last dying glow of the Sothan sun and into the endless, alien deeps of the Pharos.

The Sothans did not have long to wait for their pursuers. Before an hour was out they came into the clearing.

They were savages, far removed in appearance from the polished uniformity of the Ultramarines. Their dark blue armour was covered in the images of death, skulls painted upon their face masks. Their squad markings were small and often obscured, their plates festooned with jangling chains from which hung the bones of their victims. Skulls were gathered at their waists in obscene bunches. Some of the warriors were wearing masks over their helms. A moment passed before Mericus realised they were the stretched, tanned faces of their victims. One wore a long cloak made of skin. Lightning patterns flickered over the larger plates of some of them. There were other images playing there, bright and red. Mericus was glad he could not see them.

There were at least sixty traitors. Twenty in plain view in the clearing before the cave mouth. The movement of the quicktrees left and right betrayed the presence of more. The thick saplings crowding the edge of the clearing parted.

'Now?' asked Dorican.

‘Wait!’ whispered Mericus. ‘There are more coming to the left and right. We must catch as many as possible if we are to help the others.’

He made no mention of their own survival. There was no chance of that.

The Night Lords gathered below their position. One of them was a tracker of some kind, pointing out the marks of the Ultramarine’s passage to his superiors. One bore a massive axe, while another carried a glaive.

‘Mericus, they’re going to see us soon!’

‘Pretend you’re on a phantine drive, Hasquin,’ said Mericus.

‘These aren’t phantines!’

‘They’ll kill you just the same if you make a mistake. Hold your fire.’

More of the Night Lords were coming into the clearing. Despite their ill-favoured look, they were disciplined, and fanned out to secure the area. Their commanders were directly beneath them, night-blue monsters in cloaks of scarlet. Mericus shrank back into the scrubby plants of the ledge.

‘Now? We have to open fire now!’ hissed Chelvan.

Mericus shook his head. More of the enemy were converging on the clearing. Their guard never faltered, with their bolters up, heads and weapons tracking together as they covered every centimetre of the terrain.

A Night Lord looked toward the concealed heavy weapons. Mericus flinched, but they were not noticed.

Corvo’s force had made no effort to hide their passing, but had instead damaged the vegetation around each cave mouth. The Night Lords fanned out, silently sending recon parties inside. The rest retreated into the brush and kept watch. There were still not enough of their total number in the clearing for Mericus’ liking, but there never was going to be a perfect moment. Better they preserve the element of surprise.

‘Fire!’ he shouted, abandoning stealth.

Let the bastards know who killed them. He wanted them to be aware as they died that mere mortals had brought them low.

The bass chugging of three heavy bolters was deafening, drowning out the almost pathetic-sounding crack of lasguns. The lasbeams stabbed out at the Space Marines to little effect. But when large-calibre mass-reactives thundered into the lead Night Lords on jets of short-lived fire, they easily penetrated war-plate. Ceramite ruptured as it struggled to contain the explosions. Blood burst from huge wounds. One Night Lord lost his arm, another his head. Five were dead before they realised what was happening, more gravely injured or knocked off their feet by the force of the impacts.

Mericus’ triumphant grin turned to a frown. He never expected them to react so quickly. There was no confusion as he would have expected from a human soldier, no wild weapons discharge. They smoothly fell into a covering fire pattern, those closest to the

treeline aiming up at the rocks, stepping backwards as they shot, those furthest running full pelt into the cover of the trees. Bolt-shells burst all around the Sothans' vantage point, peppering them with painful splinters of rock. But Govenisk had been correct, their angles of fire were poor. As the rock face below them was shattered into chips, the men of the Sothan First remained unharmed.

'We've got them on the run!' shouted Eontagn, one of Govenisk's men. He stood up to better aim his lasgun and paid for his rashness with a bolt-round to his torso. Eontagn ceased to exist as a human being, his remains showering them with fragments of flesh.

'Stay down!' screamed Mericus at the men. The elation of battle flooded him, and the heady mix of fear and adrenaline birthed in him a ferocious joy.

Mericus' world shrank to a sphere centred on the clearing. Each burst of propellant as the bolts ignited on their way out of the heavy bolter barrels was a starburst. The smell of shattering rock was sharp and invigorating. The leaves of the trees took on an emerald lustre. Most glorious of all was to see the Night Lords run from the wrath of smaller men.

It could never last. A Night Lord came to the edge of the trees with a missile launcher, his fellows round him in a protective formation.

'Kill the heavy weapon!' shouted Mericus.

Dorican tracked the bolter around, never taking his finger off the trigger. Large calibre mass-reactives blew small craters in the black soil, and stitched up the chest of the traitor. He fired as he died. The rocket went wide of its mark, shooting over the Sothans' heads.

On the cliff above their position the missile exploded, bringing a tumble of rock down over the middle heavy bolter. Men screamed as they were pelted with rubble. The bolter collapsed on its bipod, the gunner dead.

'I'm out!' yelled Dorican.

Chelvan was up, a bulky replacement magazine in his hand. He slapped it into place and hit Dorican on the shoulder.

Mericus saw the Night Lord aiming for Chelvan, aiming a killing shot from a hundred metres away. He shoved at Chelvan's legs, but the bolt caught him anyway. His arm blew free, the impact sending Chelvan screaming forty metres down the cliff.

'That was all our ammunition!' shouted Hasquin.

'Dorican – make every bolt count!' said Mericus. He was calm, far calmer than he had ever been in his life. Perhaps this was how the Legiones Astartes felt, fearless. 'Look to the left! They're coming up the sides.'

The Night Lords were clambering up the cliff face, making huge power-assisted leaps, their fingers digging fresh handholds into the rock. One slipped and fell from a height that would have slain a mortal man, but he scrambled up unharmed and went for a second attempt.

Mericus crawled past Dorican as he panned his weapon around. Night Lords died on the

cliff face. The chugging of the weapon battered at his head. Mericus felt something go in his ear, his hearing dimmed, the sounds of the battle muffled by a painful ringing.

On his belly, Mericus made his way to the position of the second bolter team. The avalanche had crushed them, and Mericus had to shove blood-sticky loose stone out of the way to get at the dead loader. Rolling one large boulder free, Mericus found him. The leather magazine pouches were close to his fingertips. With a smile of relief, he reached for them, undid a clasp stiff with grit, and pulled out a full clip, grunting at the weight of it.

'Dorican! I have it!'

His triumph was short-lived. A roaring shook the world. Shouting penetrated the ringing in his ruined ears, bangs of close-range gunfire, and the heavy bolters fell silent. He rolled over onto his back and was confronted with the stuff of nightmares.

A Night Lord towered over him, the turbo fans of his jump pack whickering. He wore sleeves of human skin over his arms. His mask was cast in the shape of a leering skull, small bat wings either side of it.

'Look at what we have *here*.' Dispassionately pronounced, the words struck an awful, stomach-turning fear into Mericus. 'More flesh for the flensing.'

The Night Lord reached his obscenely clad hand down and grabbed Mericus' shirt, hauling him to his feet.

Three other jump troops landed on the ledge. Only seven of Mericus' command remained alive, their hands on their heads and fear plain on their faces.

'Take them back to Lord Kellendvar,' the monster ordered his comrades.

The Night Lords reached for men who wept open tears of terror. They were careless of their great strength, breaking the bones of mortal limbs as they seized their prey.

Jump pack jets ignited with throaty roars. The Space Marines leapt into the air. Mericus dangled from his captor's hand like an infant taken by a giant in a story. He swung uncomfortably, felt something wrench in his shoulder. The Night Lord turned glaring helm lenses on him, and dropped him to the ground.

Mericus fell hard, sprawling on the sparse grasses. He struggled to his feet, finding himself in a crowd of looming giants. One of them slapped him hard across the cheek, breaking his teeth and sending him reeling. He spat blood, tried to stand, but a second blow broke his nose and spun him into the red darkness of unconsciousness.

It was a state he would long for many times before the end.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The blood of Sotha
Under the mountain
Whispers in the dark

Kellenkir plunged arms stripped of armour deep into the chest cavity of the skinless man, the one whose uniform gave his name as ‘M. Giraldus’. Their Apothecary had gone to great lengths to keep him alive for as long as possible, and he breathed still, but though his eyes were lidless and impossible to close, they looked upon distant vistas neither brother could see. There was a peace in them that Kellendvar found fascinating. Only minutes before, the man had been screaming uncontrollably.

The peace of his last moments had got into his brother. Kellenkir took a deep, shuddering breath and wrenched out his hand, bringing with it the mashed remains of the man’s heart. With one final clack of lipless teeth, the Sothan perished.

‘Kellenkir?’ asked Kellendvar. His brother’s eyes were closed in rapture. ‘Brother?’

A slow grin spread over Kellenkir’s face. ‘Death is so sweet,’ he said. ‘I think I understand it better now.’

Kellendvar’s eyes went to the sword of plain steel locked to Kellenkir’s side. He found he could not look at it for long. There was something amiss about it, a falseness to the way it caught the light that made him wary.

‘We are losing time,’ said Kellendvar.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Kellenkir absently, already selecting his next victim.

He tossed aside the carcass. The body had become a bit of meat, unrecognisable as the man it had been.

‘See what we do to those who will not aid us!’ shouted Kellenkir. He lifted his bare, blood-soaked arms high over his head. ‘Tell us where the Ultramarines went, and we will be merciful.’

His boots squelched in bloody mud as he walked up and down the line of the Sothans. There were five remaining, kneeling at the edge of the gory clearing, a bolter to every head, forced to watch the torture and death of their fellows. Those that had shut their eyes had had them opened permanently. More than one stared unblinkingly, their cheeks tracked with blood. But they would not answer the question put to them.

One was close to cracking. Govenisk, his name ribbon proclaimed. A tremble afflicted his lower lip, and as he rigidly looked forward, he could not stop his eyes dancing up to rest upon the faces of the Space Marines before he remembered his terror, and snatched them away.

Giraldus, Govenisk… Kellendvar supposed they all had names, these feeble little people,

they all had *lives*. He found it odd to think of them as human, or that he had been that way before his elevation. Mortal, weak and doomed to die at the hands of the strong. He owed the Emperor that much, nothing more.

He had been told, upon induction to the Legion, that the cruelties of Nostramo were not unusual in the galaxy, but that there were gentler places. That they, as Night Lords, would follow the example of the Night Haunter and strike terror into the hearts of evildoers so that the innocent could sleep easily.

There had been so many evildoers, and so few innocent. The men who had told them of this proud task and laid strictures upon their behaviour had died one by one, to be replaced by the very creatures they were meant to oppose. All the while the Legion had been sent on mission after mission to non-compliant human worlds, or those that had been brought into the fold and subsequently rebelled. Kellendvar wondered when he had started to question. It was not a definable moment, but an accretion of doubt. He had lost count of how many people he had flayed and mutilated before the Imperial Truth began to look like no truth at all. The memories of the Space Marines were eidetic, or very nearly so. But the tide of blood had been so great that he could not comprehend the enormity of what he had been ordered to do and retain his sanity. Each face he had peeled free of its skull, each babe tossed into the fires, he remembered them perfectly individually. Their terror, their pleas. Every one ignored in the pursuit of a callous, greater good. But when he tried to enumerate them, he simply could not. He could not let himself count the tormented dead.

That had been the greatest lie of all. The universe was Nostramo writ large. Surviving in the stars was the same as surviving the streets of home. It made him almost nostalgic for the days he and his brother lived moment to moment, and fed on the weak.

So he perpetuated his tally of atrocity for survival's sake. If that had one redeeming factor, it was that he was no longer a hypocrite.

His brother drew his sword, that strange gift from Skraivok, and flicked the tip across the throat of a soldier. The others flinched in horror as their comrade's hot blood sprayed over them.

'You!' Kellenkir placed the sword tip against Govenisk's chest. Kellendvar's sense of misgiving increased. He experienced a moment of profound vertigo where he could not tear his attention from the sword. It hummed in his brother's hand, eager for blood itself.

'Speak. Tell me which tunnel the Ultramarines took, and you shall die easily. Do not, and you are next. I will begin with your left eye.' He moved his sword to hover millimetres from the soldier's face. 'The pain you will experience as I pull it slowly from your face will be unbearable. If the cries of your comrades did not illustrate it adequately for you, experiencing it will.' Kellenkir put up his sword. 'Varathor, a knife.'

A cruelly serrated blade was pressed into his hand. The warrior behind Govenisk gripped his head in crushing hands. Kellenkir came towards him. The soldier let out a series of choking sobs as the blade came close to his face.

'And now we begin,' said Kellenkir.

‘No! Mercy! Please, please!’ shouted Govenisk. ‘The middle tunnel, they went down the middle tunnel!’ He squealed pathetically. His captor released his head, and he pawed at Kellenkir’s greaves with filthy hands. Kellenkir pushed him back with his foot.

‘Maybe I will take an eye anyway, so that I can be sure you are telling the truth.’

‘No!’ screamed the man. ‘Please, please, do not hurt me! I do not lie, it is the middle way, the middle way!’ He collapsed forward, weeping without restraint upon Kellenkir’s boot. His fellows looked sidelong at him, disgust on their faces at his craven capitulation.

‘Do not judge,’ said Kellendvar quietly. ‘Someone always gives in, in the end. If he had not, it would have been you, or you,’ he said, pointing. ‘Once the knives began their work.’ He looked around at the broken bodies of his own brothers, eighteen of them, piled up around the edge of the clearing. ‘You were worthy foes, for mortals. Think on that as we send you screaming to your deaths.’

‘Does the human speak the truth?’ asked Bordaan.

‘He does,’ said Kellenkir.

‘Then let us finish them and be on our way.’ Bordaan unclipped his bolter and aimed it at the man sobbing on the floor.

‘Not that one! He is mine,’ said Kellendvar. He strode forward, pulled up the squirming man by his hair. The man gripped Kellendvar’s wrist to lessen the pain, but would not look at him.

‘Look at me!’ shouted Kellendvar.

The soldier did as he was commanded. He was sobbing, snot and tears running down his face.

‘Your name is Govenisk?’

‘Yes, yes, Govenisk, my lord.’

‘Well, Govenisk, you have our thanks for your information.’ Kellendvar pushed his combat blade into the man’s belly and slid it upwards. Govenisk screamed loudly as he was eviscerated. Kellendvar dropped him into the mess of his own spilled guts.

‘A coward’s reward. Kill the others cleanly.’ He turned his back on the captives. The shrill cries of the Sothan irked him.

His brother was examining his new sword, holding it up to the light with a look of childish wonder on his face.

‘Are you well, brother?’ asked Kellendvar.

Four shots rang out. Brain matter and chips of bloody bone pattered against the back of his armour. Four bodies slumped into the crushed vegetation, and Govenisk screamed on in agony.

‘I am, I am well! Very well! Exultant, radiant!’ Kellenkir enthused. The exposed skin of his face and arms were caked in blood. ‘Do you see how beautiful my new sword is?’

‘Any gift from Skraivok should be treated with caution,’ said the headsman. ‘I do not trust it. It seems… uncanny.’

‘I was inclined to the same opinion as you, brother dear,’ said Kellenkir. He held the sword lightly, at a low guard. Kellendvar stepped to the side. Kellenkir tracked his movement, point towards his brother. ‘But I have grown to like it a great deal. A simple blade, but so light and sharp. Try it!’ He made no indication of holding it out to his brother, but continued to hold it as if ready to strike.

‘I do not wish to touch it.’ He gestured at his brother’s bare arms and head with his bloodied knife. ‘Put your armour back on. We go into the tunnels.’

‘Ha! You are ordering me now, little brother? Things do change.’ He looked at the pile of ruined meat that had been the Sothan Auxilia. ‘Such a conundrum. I do not need to clad my face and hands in ceramite. Victory is already ours, and we face only a hundred Ultramarines.’ With that he turned and clambered up the cliff face, and disappeared into the middle entrance.

Kellendvar cursed him inwardly. ‘Move out,’ he ordered the others.

‘Should we not wait for reinforcement, headsman? They will be with us soon.’

‘Leave a squad of five behind. Have them vox the others and inform where we’ve gone as soon as they get into range.’ He looked up at the looming peak. ‘This war would be easier if the damned mountain held its tongue.’

‘We are outnumbered, forty-one to over a hundred.’

‘Time is of greater concern than numbers,’ said Kellendvar. ‘The Ultramarines know something we do not, else why do they make such haste towards their own suicide? Come! This encounter has cost us far too much time. We enter the workings of the beacon now.’

Darkness more complete than any Kellendvar had ever known embraced him, and he faltered. He, who loved the night for the safety and opportunity it brought!

His brother Kellenkir moved ahead of him, alone. An ogre in the dark. He had to catch up, and jogged after. His men followed.

The tunnel ran straight for a long time. Kellenkir stayed always ahead of them. When they reached a branching, he moved unerringly, marching down each passageway as if he frequented them by habit. Lacking any other guidance, Kellendvar saw no reason not to follow him. The tunnel’s smooth black stone carried no scratch or mark to indicate which way their foes had gone. Kellenkir’s guess was as good as anyone else’s.

Kellenkir spoke rarely, and took to humming a disturbing tune full of odd pitch changes and dissonance. At first Kellendvar took it to be an unrelated collection of notes, a further display of madness. Over time he noted a pattern emerging from the tune, increasing in complexity each time it repeated. That worried him more, for it was a hideous melody that did nothing for his mood. The naked sword at Kellenkir’s side glinted with a leaden light from time to time, until he looked directly at it. Kellendvar had the impression the sword

was taunting him, or had grown lax and allowed its true nature to be partially revealed, only growing dark when aware it was being directly observed. He could not keep his eyes from it. The presence was maddening, distracting, so arresting it began to overwhelm his perceptions of his brother, as if Kellenkir was carried by the sword and not vice versa.

An unwelcome tone came into Kellenkir's voice when he did speak, mocking even the simplest pronouncements and orders. He was a cruel man by any mortal's reckoning, but although Kellendvar did not agree with his brother's insane creed, there had always been an internal logic to his actions. In the bloody deeds he did, Kellenkir had been attempting to prove something.

The sight of his brother, his arms deep inside the man's chest cavity, rose in Kellendvar's mind, the peace upon his face as he killed. This was something new. There had been anger in Kellenkir aboard the *Nycton*. This new serenity did not bode well.

The passage sloped downward for several hundred metres, its angle becoming more extreme. The smooth stone proved treacherous, and the Night Lords slipped and cursed as they proceeded. The further they went, the steeper it became, and their progress slowed to a crawl.

Kellenkir was unaffected. He strode forward as easily as he would upon level ground. Concern gripped at Kellendvar as his brother once more drew ahead, becoming a grey blot on the darkness, then a smear.

'Kellenkir!' he called. His brother had discarded his vox-beads. 'Kellenkir!' his voice boomed from his helm-grille, but there was no echo, and it dwindled far quicker than it should.

Kellenkir disappeared into the dark, moving easily. Kellendvar could not match his stride and broke into a sliding jog. His feet skittered, every third step was a stumble. There was no way to see ahead; the dark was perfect and jealously hid its secrets. Not his own eyes nor the technology of his battleplate could draw its veil aside. He would have to chance whatever pit or wall awaited him. His thoughts were only on his brother.

'Headsman!' called his second.

'Follow!' His reply was a snarl. 'Slowly.'

Kellendvar outpaced his warriors, the sound of their cursing and rasping steps fading more quickly than the dim glow of their helm lenses. Darkness enveloped him, close as a second skin.

'Kellenkir!' he yelled once more.

He slipped. A foot placed wrong, heel down too hard on the stone, and his leg skidded out from under him. Flailing his arms, he went down with a hard crash. The tunnel steepened further, and he slid down its shaft on his back.

He put his hands out to control his descent. He thus prevented himself from going into a spin, but he could not prevent his acceleration, not entirely.

Blackness yawned before him, seeming infinitely vast in scope, but it was not so. The

tunnel bottomed out, and he came to a grinding halt.

An alarm chimed in his helm. He cut it off. Total silence fell.

A white face materialised suddenly out of the dark, daemonic in aspect. A human face distorted by a diabolical lens. The chin was stretched, cheekbones exaggerated, eyes sunk in angular sockets. Large bumps, smooth as sebaceous cysts but too regularly spaced to be so, marred the forehead. The thing's eyes were red and marbled. A black tongue licked at a lipless mouth.

Kellendvar yelled and yanked his bolt pistol from his thigh.

His brother looked down at him, the daemon's visage gone.

'Why the fuss, little Kell? What's all this about?'

Kellenkir had not called him 'little Kell' for a long time – not since they were boys, surviving in the deep sub-urban wastes of Nostramo Quintus.

'Kellenkir! I thought…'

Kellenkir held up a finger still painted with the blood of the Sothans to his lips. 'Hush!' he said. 'I have found something.'

Kellenkir reached out a hand. Kellendvar took it reluctantly and allowed himself to be hauled to his feet.

'This way! Come.'

They went along a curving corridor. From behind, Kellendvar heard his men reach the bottom of the slope, some arriving on their backs as he had. He was unaccountably relieved; he no longer felt safe alone with Kellenkir.

They passed a prefabricated strongpoint. The Ultramarines that had manned it were all dead.

'Your work?' Kellendvar asked.

'Mine? No,' said Kellenkir. 'Our brothers. Battle has swept through here.' He kicked at a scattering of shell casings and discarded power packs. 'They have moved on. Others of our kind passed within metres of the heart of this place, and they did not find it.' There was a sly amusement to his voice, a secret shared.

'Where have our brothers gone? Have you had any contact with them?'

'None,' said Kellenkir. There was an idiot, singsong quality to the way he spoke. 'The vox is quiet. It is not the voice one should listen to, not down here. Come on, come and you shall hear it as well…'

Kellenkir's manner was that of an adult attempting to make light of a dangerous situation; one of those deadly games parents must sometimes play to ensure their children's survival. It brought the past to Kellendvar's mind, a time when Kellenkir had behaved like that often, a fragment of a life so long ago it seemed like someone else's.

After their ascension into the recruitment ships of the Legion, and their alteration in the

surgeries of the fleets, Kellenkir's memories of mortal life had faded. Kellendvar kept more of his, but only a few.

Those recollections left to Kellenkir were mainly of their blood father, a man broken by illness and grief who drove them from their home, thereafter coming to find them only when he needed something. These appearances of their father were a harbinger of bad news as surely as those of a night crow. Kellenkir particularly remembered killing him, a deed he recounted with bitter fondness often. That was the murder that had seen them rounded up by the catch-gangs, and sent to the penal induction camps. It was their father who had doomed them to become Night Lords.

That one red day aside, Kellenkir had put much of their previous life away. For him, the Legion offered a new existence that he would not allow to be tarnished by the old. His loyalty to his blood brother alone remained. Even that had become less important to him as time had gone by, much to Kellendvar's growing sorrow.

Kellendvar often contemplated why this disparity between them had arisen. Was it because of his lesser age? Maybe Kellenkir's acts in sheltering them both had been too much for him to bear. Kellenkir was only two years older than Kellendvar, but the elder had cast himself as parent and protector. Perhaps Kellenkir's forgetting their time in the dark streets had been for his own protection.

Whatever the reason, Kellendvar remembered where his brother did not. It had caused him great pain, to see his sibling and guardian drift away from him. First into the embrace of the Legion's fraternity, then into the black nihilism that gripped him after Isstvan.

There was one night that Kellendvar remembered well.

It was rare night of boyish joy in a grim struggle for survival, a time Kellendvar held dear.

Kellenkir had run down a runty little boy, one of a gang of thieves. There had been nothing for them to eat for several days, and the boy made a welcome feast.

'Eat, eat, eat!' Kellenkir said. 'There is plenty. We sleep with full bellies tonight.'

Kellendvar remembered crying as he bit into the flesh. Not for the fate of the boy they devoured, but for the hunger that bit at his belly. He had never tasted anything so sweet in his life.

Kellenkir's eyes glowed in the firelight. 'I'll look after you, little Kell. I always will.'

Kellendvar nodded solemnly back, meat juices running down his chin, the cramps in his stomach mercifully abating.

Their den was a smoky hollow pecked out of the wall of a hab tower. It was one of the great pillars of Kemno district, the base rooted in the murk far below, the spreading penthouses of the top pressed against Nostramo's rocky sky. They lived like rats, only fifty storeys up from the dangers of the cavern bottoms. Close enough to the deep streets to hunt, high enough to remain concealed. There was enough room for them to sleep curled on their beds of rags, a space for their meagre belongings, room for a fire of bones and

rubbish. They set it always at the back of the den. The acrid fumes hurt their noses and eyes, and lent what little food they could scavenge the taste of burnt plastek, but they dared not light it close to the tear in the building to let out smoke and light to betray them. So they endured it, exchanging the certainty of a swift death today for a slow end by inhaled poison tomorrow. It was safe in their artificial cave, safer than the home they had fled, safer than the streets. The fate of the boy they were eating testified to that.

Kellenkir smiled at his brother. The brutality of their life had already entered his soul, hardening his eyes, but his virtue had yet to flee completely, and he had been kinder then.

An explosion outside had them cowering. Flashes of light made them cover their eyes and moan in terror. Gangs fought nightly in the streets. There had been a time of peace, it had been rumoured, when the Night Haunter cowed the planet through righteous terror. Kellendvar naively believed all the stories, and whispered to the Night Haunter in the night, that he might come and save him.

But these explosions were not gunshots. Faint music played between the bangs. Kellenkir risked a look outside.

He drew back quickly. Smiling widely at his brother, he beckoned him. ‘Come look, little Kell, look!’

Kellendvar came to the hole in the wall. He trusted Kellenkir completely.

The atmosphere outside was soupy with pollution, but better than that of the cave. Kellendvar coughed, his brother rubbed his back until it stopped.

‘Look! Look up!’

Patterns of light burst in the sky, low-yield, not too bright for Nostraman eyes, all blues and deep violets edging into the very far end of the visible spectrum.

‘What is it?’ asked Kellendvar, still afraid.

‘A celebration,’ said his brother. ‘A lordling’s naming day perhaps. Father used to tell me about the rich folk in the upper levels. He was a server to them, you know. Before, before… Well, before the bad times.’

Neither of them ever spoke of the disease that had taken their mother and broken their father’s mind, turning him from parent to wreck, then finally to fiend.

The music grew louder. A slender cave ship passed along between the spires of Kemno, brilliant lights of gold and blue and green flickering over the filth-crusted lower city.

‘Let it be known, this day the eldest son of House Skraivok takes his lord-name. Let it be known! Gendor Skraivok! Gendor Skraivok! Hail! Hail! Hail!’

Low-yield lasers crossed the sky. Fireworks boomed around the craft. The boys shrank back, their sensitive eyes narrowed and hands clapped over their ears. They laughed at the display still, taking pleasure in the thrill of the boom, the searing light patterns, and their own startled reactions to both.

The cave ship slid on by. Images played over its long hull, showing celebrations in a

place the boys would not believe existed if it were not displayed before them. A young man's face, not much older than Kellenkir, featured prominently.

Kellenkir stood, and reached out a hand.

'Come on! Let's dance!' he said laughingly, and hauled his little brother to his feet.

They danced with the unselfconscious abandon of children to the music of the far-away ball while ultraviolet stars burst all around. They laughed freely for the first time in months, safe in the knowledge the noise of the display would mask their delight.

Several times in the following years Kellendvar had brought this event up, hoping to kindle some recognition in his brother. When he was well-disposed to his sibling, Kellenkir had maintained that he did remember. But when he joined in the story, it was only repetition of what he had already been told. Kellenkir's eyes told Kellendvar that he could not remember the fireworks.

As Kellendvar retold his memory again and again, it lost its vitality. It permanently fixed itself, becoming a Space Marine's cast-iron remembrance of a memory, rather than a mutable, living recollection.

There was one detail he never shared with Kellenkir.

Kellenkir revelled in the fireworks with the joy of the damned. Kellendvar's enjoyment was slightly restrained. As they danced and cackled at the nobles' display, his eyes strayed to their small fire, to the delicate long bones toasting within, and the lump under the cloth on the far side. Now his hunger was sated, he could not help but think that the boy they ate might have liked the fireworks too.

Kellenkir brought them to a junction with a new tunnel, and here the character of the labyrinth changed, for the tunnel had an elevated walkway of Imperial make running down it. Yellow lumen balls topped posts at fifty-metre intervals. Half of them were out and the ones that glowed did so faintly, but after the midnight of the deeps, Kellendvar dimmed his helm lenses against them.

'This way,' said Kellenkir, climbing up onto the walkway via a set of three broad steps.

Kellendvar motioned for his Space Marines to follow. There was still no sign of any other Night Lords or Ultramarines. They clanked down the walkway unchallenged and isolated, hearing no footsteps but their own.

The came to a place where the lumens gave out, and the darkness rushed back in. A strange sense of disorientation came with it. Kellenkir did not slow, and outpaced his brother.

Kellendvar broke into a run after him. His perceptions became foggy; he was dizzy and he staggered.

A splayed hand thumped into Kellendvar's chest.

'Come no further,' said Kellenkir.

'Something down here is affecting me,' slurred Kellendvar.

‘There is! It is what I want you to see. Listen to it.’

Kellendvar’s eyes adjusted and the dizziness lessened a little. There was the sense of a larger space ahead. He pulled a flare from his belt and struck it on the wall. Sullen red light burst across the room. Behind, his men caught up. They stopped at the edge of the flare’s light, many of them complaining of nausea and disorientation.

They were at the brink of a pit, a circle that was unnerving in its perfection. A hundred metres across, he guessed, probably as deep.

The walkway terminated at the lip of the pit, but there had once been a bridge there. The walkway metal was bent out of shape. Part of the structure curved over the edge, ending in a jagged edge of torn metal. A matching piece reached out from the other side.

‘Down there,’ said Kellenkir, ‘are secrets undreamt of. Whispers in endless night. Can you hear them? The servants of Macragge know. They have not rebuilt their bridge!’ He laughed, a black giggle that was mostly growl. ‘The builders of this place wait. They wait for a time when Chaos is done.’

‘Here? There are xenos here? Kellenkir, you are–’

‘Insane? Mad?’

‘Mistaken,’ said Kellendvar.

Kellenkir tittered, wiping clumsily at the saliva spilling from his mouth. The blood on his arms smeared his face. ‘They are not here. They are far, far away. This is but one of their places, a tool working away the countless millennia, waiting to be called back into service when the masters awake! Such arrogance. One cannot outwait the eternal! They will come back, one day, to find their scheme in tatters. Until then, their devices speak to each other, recording news of all they see! Can you hear the voices? There is wisdom in what they say.’

Kellendvar shook his brother’s shoulder. ‘Come on. Stop this madness. I can hear nothing.’ He looked back at his warriors, aware that they heard every insane word.

‘That is because you do not listen, brother! You never have. Do you think they know what they have here, the self-righteous lords of Ultramar? I do not think they do. They lack the imagination to grasp it.’ He smiled wolfishly, the widest smile Kellendvar had ever seen on his face. It was in all respects wrong. ‘We have imagination though, eh, little Kell?’

‘Yes,’ said Kellendvar warily. ‘Yes, we do. Which way now?’ he asked. ‘Where are the Ultramarines?’

Kellenkir made no indication he heard his brother, but stood at the edge of the broken bridge, his head to one side, listening to something only he could hear.

‘Brother!’ said Kellendvar.

Again that same inhuman smile split his brother’s features, and Kellendvar thought he heard two voices answering, not one.

‘Back there. They have gone to the roots of Sotha. We go back, then we go deeper.’

TWENTY-NINE

Alpha
Ultra
Betrayal

Primary Location Alpha shook to the beat of the mountain's quantum pulse. The atmosphere crackled with barely restrained power. Sparks flew from armour. The Mechanicum machines showed a galaxy of red lights. Outside, the red of the Ruinstorm was giving way to the pale steel of predawn. Dantioch glanced at it anxiously through the cave mouth leading out onto the promontory.

'The machine is ready. We may commence your search for the *Nightfall* now. If we find the vessel, you will not be able to translocate until after the light event. Only then will the quantum engines be fully charged.'

'Very well,' said Krukesh. 'Proceed.'

'There is no guarantee this will work, Lord Krukesh. The Pharos has a limited range – it may not grant what you desire.'

'If it does not,' said Krukesh, 'Captain Polux will suffer for it.'

Polux hung limply from a torture cross, barely conscious. Mercifully, he was not seriously hurt, although blood streaked his skin and pain spikes jutted from every interface port in his skin.

'Think on the *Nightfall*. You know it well?' said Dantioch.

'I have walked its decks many hundreds of times,' said the Kyroptera lord condescendingly.

'Then remember it. Call it to mind. I cannot focus on something I do not know the location of, but your desire…' Dantioch adjusted the machinery, opening the conduits fully. 'That will find it for you.'

Krukesh turned to face the focus field. He breathed deeply, concentrating, but arrogant and assured of his success. Dantioch moved with care. What he was attempting had to appear harmless.

The black wall of the cave disappeared. The focus field of the Pharos lensed, displaying a smoky nothingness. Dantioch tensed. Krukesh curled his lip at him. 'Warsmith…'

'Lord Krukesh!' said Skraivok. He pointed to the focus field. A wavering in the air became an image, unfocused and bleary.

'I will see it, warsmith! Show me the flagship of my Legion!'

The image doubled, the two superimposed images slid over each other. The rumble of the xenos engines began to reverberate in the walls.

‘Give it to me!’ snarled Krukesh. His fists were clenched.

‘I am attempting to focus the Pharos! I require time!’

The picture disappeared. Dantioch limped along his array of instruments.

‘Tear out Captain Polux’s tongue!’ snapped Krukesh.

A Night Lord grabbed Polux’s head. Hard ceramite hands tipped it back. A second forced his jaw wide and a third brought up a vicious pair of angled pliers, long and thin, the end tipped with a curved pair of shear blades, the grippers studded with spikes.

‘No!’ said Dantioch. ‘Do not harm him! I am doing as you ask!’

Krukesh shook his head. ‘Too late.’

The shears were forced into Polux’s mouth. At the scrape of metal on his teeth he came fully awake. He threw his head from side to side, then convulsed, the pain spikes burning into his nervous system.

Dantioch became desperate. Affection of this kind was a weakness, he knew, but Polux was his friend.

Polux moaned as the shears nipped at his tongue.

‘Aha!’ said Krukesh. Upon the stage a scene gathered, swimming from obscurity into sharp focus; the command deck of a battleship, umbrous and sinister. ‘The *Nightfall*! Dantioch holds true to his promise. Hold your actions, brothers,’ said Krukesh. The Night Lords by Polux stopped rooting around in his mouth, and withdrew their implement. Polux spat blood.

‘I will kill you all,’ he said.

‘You see, Dantioch! He speaks.’ Krukesh smiled at the image with satisfaction. On board the ship, pale, malnourished men and women worked in near silence at their stations, their every action watched by darkly clad Night Lords and haughty human officers in uniforms of deepest blue.

‘Brothers of the Legion!’ he called. ‘Heed me!’

They showed no sign of hearing him. The image dimmed.

‘Dantioch,’ he growled.

‘My lord, I must increase the power.’

Dantioch moved as quickly as he could, twisting dial after dial on the instrument banks. He opened every conduit to the quantum engines. Primary Location Alpha trembled with barely channelled energies. A low moan blew through the tunnels. Infrasound thrummed in their bones.

‘*Brothers!*’ yelled Krukesh.

This time, the crew and warriors aboard the *Nightfall* did hear him. Space Marines whirled around, guns out. The command crew began shouting, orders and queries passed

back and forth.

One legionary came forward. He was helmetless, his armour inscribed with the rank insignia of Exalted Terror Master.

'What is the meaning of this?'

'It is I, Krukesh the Pale. Do you not recognise me?' He held up his arms. 'I recognise you, Terror Master Thandamell.'

The warriors maintained their alert. 'By what means do you communicate with us?'

'A xenos beacon, lately the property of the Thirteenth Legion, now mine.'

'Impossible, a trick.'

'It is not a trick, dear Thandamell. Such things I have seen! I will return to you. Sevatar is in chains, the Night Haunter is missing. We must act!'

The Night Lords opened fire. Shouts and yells came from out of sight. Krukesh laughed.

'I can step aboard at any time I wish, but you cannot touch me. Listen to me! Our primarch has deserted us, and his lapdog First Captain is captured. Our fleets are scattered. We must band together, my fleet and yours, and rendezvous with the rest. The time for licking our wounds is done. Sevatar was too quick in dividing our forces, and has failed dismally in reuniting them. I am here now to save us all from disaster.'

'And do the warriors of the Atramentar hold with this opinion?' said Thandamell. He nodded to the Terminators behind Krukesh.

'Their loyalty is mine to command. Those who could see no sense have been disposed of. They see now that I am the only hope for the Legion.' This gave Thandamell pause. 'Surely you see their support gives me legitimacy?'

Thandamell gave a sharp, unfriendly smile. 'And by this logic we should bow to you like them?'

'I am Kyroptera,' said Krukesh. 'Sevatar was your commander. He is not aboard your ship. He is missing. He abandoned us. I am ranking lord.'

'Sevatar appointed you,' said Thandamell. 'How do I know you will not betray us as he did?'

Krukesh laughed. 'Come now, Thandamell. I would not be so unsubtle. I only wish to see Sevatar's orders to regroup fulfilled. Prepare yourselves for my arrival.'

Corvo stepped into Primary Location Ultra carefully. The builders of the Pharos had not cared for guard rails. A sheer drop ended the passage, only passable thanks to a walkway that had been installed there by the Mechanicum.

He stepped onto it and looked out over a huge cavern, bigger than any other they had yet encountered. As with the rest of the Pharos, it was fashioned of altered stone – glossy and black as interstellar space, night trapped in vitreous form. That commonality aside, the room was singular. Here the ergonomic shapes of the tunnels gave way to precisely carved

angles. Six massive structures occupied the floor, huge things in the shape of metal ingots. Ribs stretched out of the floor up their sloping sides and onto the roofs of the structures; they did not meet, but left a sharply angled gap down the centre of each. Window slots cut into the sides of the structures alternated with these ribs, and these glowed with a vibrant green light.

The machines appeared to have no motive parts, being made of the same flawless stone that made up the tunnel walls, but the chamber hummed with their industy. A sensation of great power pervaded the room, as palpable as a prickling feeling on the air that grew thicker as they went further in. Corvo found it reminiscent of the funerary monuments of the ancient Gyptians of Terra – a world of granite geometries intended for an eternity.

Were it not for the metal clamps suckered onto the machines and the thick cables that snaked from these to transect the glossy floor, Corvo would have walked cautiously. The clumsiness of the human technology spoiled the purity of the design, but Corvo found them fitting, manacles of plastek, steel and glittering optics, chaining the alien devices to mankind's will. The Mechanicum had tamed the Pharos.

Oberdeii stepped to the railing around the walkway and rested one hand lightly there. The boy's face was pale in the green light. 'This is Primary Location Ultra. Here the quantum engines that power the Pharos, and make its operation possible, are housed,' he said. More borrowed words. They sounded hollow, inadequate to describe the might of the ancient sciences there arrayed. 'The Mechanicum's governing and moderating machinery is in the galleries below the walkway.' He pointed to a flight of stairs coming off the catwalk. These went down some sixty metres, divided up by short landings.

'Nova Company veterans,' ordered Corvo. 'To your task. We must be swift. The enemy will be here soon.' He looked across the chamber. Many other tunnels opened into Primary Location Ultra, some lined with Imperial walkways, others gaping unrailed and perilous. 'Neophyte, how many of these lead back to the way we came?'

'Nobody knows,' said Oberdeii. His eyes were wide. The word 'haunted' sprang into Corvo's mind. 'Half a dozen, at least. Some of them have yet to be mapped. You can go everywhere from here. Those there go to the mountain peak eventually.' He pointed out a trio of square-cut apertures on the far side, the middle one reached by a prefabricated staircase.

This was news Corvo had not wished to hear. He must divide his forces, or risk being cut down by the Night Lords if – when – they came into the chamber.

'Crassus! Three squads, form a demolition team. Take out the Mechanicum machines. Be careful not to damage the xenos devices.'

'Immediately, captain,' said Crassus.

His lieutenant went about his task efficiently, leading thirty-five men down the stairs. Correlus, the strike force's Techmarine, went with them. Corvo ordered his heavy weapons troopers and support squads into position, covering the walkways and major tunnel entrances.

He called up some of Guilliman's writings on similar unusual deployments on his helm display. Consulting them, he became engrossed organising the defence until, some time later, Correlus contacted him. A steady pulse played under his message, the voice of the machines intruding on their vox.

'Captain, I have something you should see.'

'Affirmative. Neophytes, come with me. You are vulnerable here.' Oberdeii, Tebecai and their squad mates fell in behind the captain, and they all went down the steps together.

Corvo's auto-senses registered high static build up and discharged the energy through his boot soles.

The demolition detail ranged throughout the structure, targeting the Mechanicum additions to the xenos devices. A long row of machines lined the wall under the walkway, plugged by snaking cables into the quantum-pulse engines. The cables had been prepared for destruction with phosphor cords, and already melta bombs on remote detonation settings were clamped to the invidual units of Mechanicum cogitator arrays. A number of servitors prowled the aisles on maintenance patterns. They offered no aggression, but were gunned down when encountered by his warriors.

Correlus waited halfway down the long machine banks. Corvo picked his way over the cables to meet him.

'Captain,' he said, 'it is this that concerns me.' He pointed at a round screen covered with green lines that oscillated to a steady rhythm.

'Explain it,' said Corvo. The readings meant nothing to him.

'The Pharos is in use, captain. These machines monitor the power output of the quantum engines.'

'We are just in time, then.'

'Perhaps. At the moment they are not fully active, but something is happening. You hear the engine pulse on the vox? It is steadily increasing.'

'Do you know what–'

A shout went up from the upper reaches, and the crackling, repetitive booming of heavy bolter fire echoed around the chamber. 'Contact. Contact!'

'The Night Lords have encountered our rearguard,' said Corvo. 'Squads Four and Seven, leave the demolition detail. The rest of you, conclude preparations for destruction.'

His men went about their business quickly, placing bulky melta bombs on every piece of human technology they came across.

'Correlus, monitor the situation.'

'As you wish, brother-captain.' Snakelike, his servo harness' arms rose up, the plasma cells on its in-built weapons glowing as they charged to fire. They pointed towards the walkway as Correlus returned his attention to the cogitator displays.

‘Neophytes, remain with him,’ ordered Corvo and ran back toward the stairs, drawing his sword as he went. The Night Lords were attacking four entrances at once. Corvo’s men, although superior in number, were hard-pressed to cover every entrance. The enemy broke through one of the squads on the far side of Primary Location Ultra almost immediately, and took up station on the gantry where they laid down a murderous barrage of fire. The Ultramarines defending the other entryways were caught in a crossfire, those down on the engine room floor found themselves exposed. An Ultramarine in the centre of the room was cut down by a plasma bolt, and his melta bomb spun out of his hand. The demolition team ran for cover as bolt-rounds and worse hailed down at them.

Gunfire roared all around the chamber. Where it hit the black stone it brought forth flares of green fire.

‘Squads Four and Seven, cover entrance beta. I’m on my way. Demolition detail, form up. Take shelter under the gantry. Come at them from below.’

The stairs lay ahead. Corvo thumbed the activation stud on his power sword and ran faster.

A cry came from above as a Night Lord leapt the sixty metres down. Corvo dodged to the side just in time, trusting to the drop to disable his enemy.

The Night Lord landed with a thunder of ceramite on stone, skidding sideways on the smooth surface. As he fell, he caught Corvo a glancing blow, sending him staggering to the side. They recovered simultaneously, and Corvo found himself grappling with a helmetless warrior, his arms bare of plate and caked in blood. With gory fingers his enemy grabbed at the rims of Corvo’s pauldrons. Corvo drove him back, slamming him into a walkway support, bending it. He followed into him, pushing the warrior and casting him into the vitreous walls. Armour sparked on hard black stone. Corvo was free of the warrior’s grapple and came up into guard with his power sword in his hand. Energy fizzed around it, the field flaring in the exotic radiations of the engine chamber.

Corvo’s opponent was a savage, his armour scratched and scored and covered in blood. The broken remains of skulls and bones hung from cords looped through holes in his shoulder guards. His bare face was wild with a barbarous joy unbefitting a Space Marine, the pale skin of his cheeks and lips smirched with the life fluids of his victions. In his right hand he carried an iron sword. The plainness of the blade belied its dark nature. Corvo instinctively recognised it; he had seen warp-craft at work before on Astagar, wielded by Lorgar’s fanatics. This weapon carried the same taint as the corrupted Titan *Felghast*. He was sure of it.

‘Have you fallen so far that you cavort with the creatures of the warp?’ Corvo said.

The warrior smiled a smile that had little of humanity left to it.

‘My name is Kellenkir, and I am your death.’

Kellenkir attacked. He moved with such speed that Corvo was almost cut in two by his first attack. When he parried the sword its fell energies reacted with the power field of his blade, causing such an explosion both of them were thrown backwards. They recovered

together, and leapt roaring at one another again.

They fought furiously, pressing back and forth as they attempted to draw each other into rash attack. Corvo expected a savage contest, but his opponent appeared to be as technical a warrior as he was a berserk, relying on false openings and feints. Corvo guardedly responded to a couple of these to gauge the warrior's skills. There he met savagery, a flurry of hard attacks that jarred his sword hand. Restraint followed offence, the Night Lord dropping back into careful probing once his assault proved ineffective, before attacking again with astounding violence.

So it proceeded. In the wider battle the Ultramarines' greater numbers began to tell. The gantry was retaken. The traitors were fragmented, and pushed back. None dared intervene in the contest between Corvo and Kellenkir; they battled blade to blade, heroes of myth born anew in ceramite.

A klaxon blared five times.

'*Dawn! The light comes!*' Correlus voxed. '*Stand ready!*'

A faint glow came into the chamber, growing more intense by the second. The engines whined louder at its approach. Corvo arced his sword over his head, sending Kellenkir rocking backwards on his feet. Through the shower of sparks and energy discharge, he saw the far tunnels blazing golden.

Light burst into the chamber like a flood of water. Where it touched, the stone answered with sparkling green flecks of its own, greatest where the room had been damaged by the battle. The light was sluggish, slow enough to see it tentatively creep over the machines and secret places of the room. It grew slower the nearer it came to the centre of the chamber. Seeing light so retarded in speed was among the most bizarre things Corvo had ever seen.

Kellenkir had his back to the hindered dawn, and so it hit Corvo's eyes first, overwhelming his auto-senses and dazzling him. It was viscous and scorching as molten iron.

Corvo flung up his arm.

Kellenkir's blade whistled at him, black smoke boiling from it in the light. The tip cut under Corvo's hurried defence, and hit his plastron. The ceramite parted, and the sword scraped across Corvo's fused rib cage. Terrific pain burst from the cut, and it was all Corvo could do to keep to his feet. A following blow nearly ended him. He tottered back, barely managing to deflect a third attack. Kellenkir was nearly on him, their breastplates knocking together, blood-fouled breath hot on his face. Desperately Corvo twisted his sword inward and down, flinging Kellenkir's blade wide. Kellenkir responded by barging Corvo off his feet.

His sword still smoking, Kellenkir stood over the downed Ultramarine, and raised the daemon blade high.

The Night Lords shrank back as the dawn burst through the entrance to Primary Location Alpha. The cavern blazed, the Nostramans holding up hands to cover lenses darkened to

maximum opacity. The light spilled from the Pharos across time and space, illuminating the grim interior of the *Nightfall*'s command deck, causing the mortal crew to scream in pain.

Dantioch worked the machine banks. Every dial was turned to maximum. Power needles inched their way across their gauges into the red zone. Every precaution he had taken in the past he brazenly disregarded now.

'Lord Krukesh,' said Dantioch, limping across the room. 'Everything is prepared. I must join you upon the tuning stage.'

'Do not attempt to trick me, Dantioch.'

'The beam must be anchored at this end,' explained Dantioch. 'You have proven adept at the use of the beacon, but it has to be focused at this end. Once you step through, your influence on the machines will waver and you risk becoming lost. Only I have the expertise to do this. I must focus the beam for you.'

'You have performed this action before?'

'Many times,' lied Dantioch. 'It is by these means that Polux was brought here. We must be swift. Only while the light event is in process will there be enough power to project you all the way to the *Nightfall*. If we tarry, the energies will dissipate and we will not be able to attempt the translocation again until the evening at the earliest.'

'Very well!' snapped Krukesh. 'Atramentar!'

His Terminators joined him on the tuning stage.

Primary Location Alpha howled with energy.

Dantioch had never dared open the conduits so fully. The room trembled. Stone creaked. In the walls, the green glimmers called out by the sunrise shone with an intensity unseen, dancing in agitation.

'Is it ready, my lord, you must step forward. It is as simple as walking from one room to another.'

One of his Atramentar made to go first, but Krukesh restrained him. 'Wait.' He unclipped a skull from his trophy chains and hurled it at the command deck. It shattered into splinters against a filthy bulwark.

'You do not lie, Dantioch,' said Krukesh. 'Very impressive. Skraivok, join us. The rest of you remain here. Once we are through, we will provide you with the location of the *Nightfall*'s fleet. Prepare to return to your ships and depart for rendezvous.'

'Ready for translocation,' said Dantioch. An earthquake shook the room. Sparks burst from a console in the rank. 'This is to be expected. The strain of so long-range a projection is great. Hurry!'

Krukesh motioned his men forward.

Dantioch screwed his eyes shut and concentrated. He was not a superstitious man, he did

not hold with the bizarre creed of the tech-adepts of Mars. He was a scientist of the purest sort. But now he uttered a silent prayer.

Primary Location Alpha shook. The image of the *Nightfall* glowed with bright power.

The one named Skraivok turned to look at him, realisation dawning on his face as the light of dawn poured into Primary Location Alpha and the mountain screamed.

'No! Stop him, stop him! This is a trap!'

Kellendvar was fighting on the gantry when the golden light flooded the chamber. Both sides battling high above the machines faltered at its dazzling glare, but the Night Lords were worse affected, and several were felled.

Kellendvar fought to keep his eyes open. Half-blinded, he kicked the warrior he was fighting backward, cutting his arm off at the elbow with a tremendous blow from his axe. Kellendvar stamped on the downed Space Marine's head, cracking his helmet and knocking him unconscious. Auto-senses beeped, turning his lenses almost opaque. Still his eyes streamed with tears; the pain from the light was nearly unbearable. They were losing. They had to withdraw.

'Kellenkir!' he shouted, searching the engine room floor for his brother. He found him soon enough, duelling with the Ultramarines captain.

What he saw in the golden light rocked him to the core.

His brother was not alone.

He fancied that a creature clung to Kellenkir's back. Spindly, many-jointed legs wrapped around his greaves, its body bent around his backpack, its head alongside his, long snout jutting over his shoulder. Thin lips rested against Kellenkir's ear, whispering secrets that Kellendvar never wanted to hear…

The half-glimpsed beast appeared to be climbing *inside* his brother. Its limbs had sunk partway into those of Kellenkir. Sickly flesh spread over the plates of his armour in an attempt to envelop it. The creature was translucent, but all too real. Its presence did something to his brother, for Kellenkir fought unaffected by the light. The Ultramarines captain sprawled on the floor, hand shading his eyes, his power sword up as Kellenkir rained blow after blow upon him. He used no bladecraft, but hacked blindly at the captain's sword. Each contact brought forth a crackling bang from the power field, and a wash of unnatural light from the blade.

The howl of the quantum engines had become deafening, a throbbing noise that thumped through the chamber and drove out all other sound.

'Kellenkir!' he called again. The engines were so loud he could hardly hear his own voice.

Kellendvar ran for the stairs, smashing Night Lords and Ultramarines alike aside in his rush.

The creature was disappearing into his brother. He had to get it off him. He had heard of

the warp entities that dwelt inside the bodies of chosen Word Bearers, but they had given themselves willingly. His brother had only ever had disdain for such weakness.

The sword. Damn Skraivok. The sword!

He decapitated an Ultramarine with his axe, shoving his headless corpse over the railing, and leapt down the stairs three at a time. If he could get the blade away from his brother, perhaps he could save him.

Kellendvar bounded across the engine room floor, and threw himself at Kellenkir, tackling him about the shoulders. He flinched as he touched the daemon creature, but he could not feel it. It was insubstantial and passed through his armour as if it were not there. Nevertheless, the non-creature turned its unspeakable head and hissed at him.

The light event was levelling out, becoming a honeyed illumination that drenched the hall. The Ultramarines recovered more quickly, and more Night Lords fell. The battle was turning against them, but Kellendvar and Kellenkir were locked in their own struggle, wrestling upon the floor as their brothers were isolated and cut down.

'The sword, brother, drop the sword!' Kellendvar grasped his brother's wrist, and tried to prise open the fingers, but they were solidly wrapped around the hilt and would not come free.

Kellenkir snarled. His eyes were no longer his own, but red and gold, veined like marble, the eyes of the thing he had seen in the dark. He hurled Kellendvar off. Kellenkir had always been the stronger of the two, but this was something else. Kellendvar flew through the air and crashed into the side of an alien machine. His armour dented, something gave inside him. Blood bubbled into his mouth.

'I will slay you, human,' spat Kellenkir in a voice that was not his own.

The Ultramarines captain was getting to his feet. The light was draining away, pools of it collected in corners. Each shrank quickly as the stone drank it away.

Behind Kellendvar, the machines sang louder and louder, shaking the mountain with their roar.

Kellenkir came at the captain in a rush. Other Ultramarines were turning their attention to the fight. There were few Night Lords remaining. Bolt-fire smacked into Kellenkir but the projectiles simply vanished, spirited away by the power of the daemon riding Kellenkir's back.

'I have known your kind!' shouted the captain. He had a noble's face, thought Kellendvar, patrician and disdainful as those wicked men who had hunted and used them on Nostramo. There was a face that had wanted for nothing, that had never suffered. No doubt he thought himself a paragon of virtue. 'I have seen warp-spawn infest machines and men! It will not stand while I draw breath. Not here, not in Ultramar!'

The captain lunged hard. Kellenkir brought his sword around. Its shape warped before Kellendvar's eyes, his vision doubled. He looked upon his brother bearing a plain blade; he saw a misshapen thing squirming its way into Kellenkir's body, the blade its impossibly

long fingernail, dripping with blood.

The explosion as the swords met threw both combatants backward. The Ultramarine came off worse, lifted off his feet and dashed against thick metal cable housing crawling up the side of an engine. Kellenkir braced against the force of the blast, sliding backwards across the stone. Painful lights burned around him, a sick aura of corruption. More Ultramarines were coming.

'Kellenkir! Leave him. We must depart! The day is lost!'

The possessed legionary turned and reached out a clawed hand to him. ***'The brother,'*** said the daemon's voice. ***'So long you have held this one back, so much he gave to keep you safe. Look you now upon yourself, and see what a thing you are!'***

Images of weakness flooded Kellendvar's mind, and he collapsed to his knees screaming in psychic pain. He saw himself as a feeble boy, forever at his brother's heels, holding him back, forcing his brother to commit terrible acts to protect him. It was his fault, he had turned his brother into a monster. His fault! If it were not for Kellendvar…

No.

He would not yield. He would not die, not like this.

'If not for me he would be dead!' spat the headsman. 'He would have died on Nostramo!' He got to his feet, pushing the daemon from his mind with a great effort of will.

Kellenkir was advancing on the fallen captain. The Ultramarine was dazed, his sword gone. He struggled to sit as Kellenkir raised Skraivok's cursed weapon.

'With the death of you, Lucretius Corvo, shall I be whole! A worthy gift to my master! Ingress! Ingress to the world of meat and dust!' howled the creature that Kellenkir was becoming. Kellendvar saw the daemon now without the need for the Pharos' light. It had sunk most of the way into his brother, parasiting his soul.

Kellendvar had known many Kellenkirs in his life. The brother, protector, fellow warrior, friend, murderer… None of them remained in the thing menacing the Ultramarine.

He knew what he must do.

With shaking hands, he lifted his axe high above his head, and brought it down hard upon the pulsing back of the thing that had been his brother. The weapon's field boomed like thunder as it cut deep into his brother's power pack. Smoke vented from the damaged machinery inside.

Kellenkir let out a double scream. The warp-spawn upon him thrashed, half rising from his back. Kellendvar wrenched out his axe, raised it, and struck his brother again, cutting deep into his side. Kellenkir collapsed, turning as he fell to his knees. He looked up at Kellendvar and blinked.

The red and gold marbled eyes of the daemon were gone, his own eyes now fixed upon Kellendvar's axe.

'Brother?' he said, caught between fury and confusion. 'Why do you strike me?'

‘It is over, Kellenkir, you are free. Skraivok betrayed you.’

‘You? You call that freedom? You took my power!’ Kellenkir snarled. ‘You always were so weak, little brother. I should never have protected you. I should kill you now, and correct my mistake.’

Kellendvar shook his head. His birth heart was leaden in his chest. His secondary heart felt like an abomination nestled beside it, something he had never asked for. His power was a weight on him. Curze was right. The universe was unfeeling, merciless, cruel. There was no hope.

‘No, brother,’ he said, too quietly to be heard over the scream of the Pharos. ‘We both died a long time ago.’

Kellendvar swung his axe around with all his might. Its keen edge swept off the vent of Kellenkir’s backpack, the energy field crackling. The vent fell to the floor. Kellenkir’s head followed it.

Blood pooled around Kellendvar’s feet. The Ultramarines captain stared, swaying unsteadily to his feet, clutching at the sparking rent in his armour. He had a bolt pistol in his hand.

Kellendvar stood tall, and threw his axe aside.

‘Traitor,’ said the captain.

Three rounds hammered into Kellendvar’s chest. Seeing their leader open fire, the Ultramarines followed suit. A dozen bolts hit him at once. They shattered his armour. The explosions of the mass-reactives were separated from each other by milliseconds. They obliterated his flesh, and Kellendvar felt no more.

The shattered headsman fell. His corpse, so much ragged metal and pulverised meat, came to rest lying atop the other. Corvo lowered his gun and put a hand to the crack in his breastplate. The blood was slowing, but the pain was of an unclean kind that refused to die. When his men came to steady him, he couldn’t have shrugged them off had he wanted to.

‘The sword,’ he said hoarsely. ‘It must be destroyed.’

‘Sword?’ one asked.

‘Find it!’

His men searched the slaughtered Night Lords in the golden dazzle of the room, turning them over to look beneath. ‘There’s nothing here, my lord.’

‘Impossible,’ Corvo said. As he said the word he knew it for a lie. He had seen too many impossible things in the last few years to have any faith in the word any more.

The alien engines’ pitch was building, a booming throb now over a pulsing vibrato of infrasound that caused his wound to burn. ‘What is happening?’ he demanded, his vox set at maximum in an effort to be heard.

Techmarine Correlus looked up from the bank of Mechanicum machines. ‘Overload. The draw on the engines increases exponentially as the light event progresses.’

Corvo shoved the men supporting him away and hobbled over.

‘These dials, they show the power draw. See how they are all creeping into the red. As far as I can tell, these machines act as a governor for the xenos engines, dictating how much energy might be utilised. That light event has charged them. The modifications act as a modulator, smoothing out the energy draw. Most of this machinery seems to exist to allow the safe bleeding-off of excess power to allow directed operation. Someone’s directing it now, but that someone’s taken all the governers off.’

‘What will happen when they reach the maximum?’ said Corvo.

‘As my tutors on Mars would say, captain, the Omnissiah acts mysteriously. The ways of the motive force may be understood, from positive to negative and on through the circuit. That which guides it may not.’

‘You do not know.’

‘No. That is what they generally meant when they said that.’

‘And if we proceed with the plan?’

‘The machines are a brake. If we remove it entirely during the light event…’ The Techmarine shrugged. The arms of his tech-adept’s harness mimicked the motion.

‘Give me a theoretical, Correlus.’

‘Destruction of the Mechanicum devices will render the Pharos inoperable until they are replaced as per the plan, but there is a risk – I calculate of forty-five per cent – that we may damage it beyond repair should we remove their moderating influence altogether at this juncture,’ ventured the Techmarine.

Corvo ground his teeth. He tasted blood in his mouth. ‘I’ll not be the one to destroy the Pharos so readily. If I must, I must, but for the time being our objective remains only to cripple it.’ He looked around the entrances to Primary Location Ultra, now brighter shapes within the diffuse illumination of the machine hall. ‘We are alone. Set the charges for remote detonation. When – if – this light event is done and we have a better understanding of the current practical, we will execute our orders.’

The engines roared. The green light emanating from their slots grew in radiance. Arcs of lightning whipped out with loud cracks, leaping all over the engines.

‘Might I suggest we wait from a safe distance, my lord?’ shouted Correlus over the noise.

‘You might suggest, brother Techmarine. How far?’

‘Your theoretical is as good as mine, captain, but we must go now!’

Skraivok’s warning came too late. He pulled a bolter from the grasp of the warrior next to him and opened fire, but his bolts never met their mark. They slowed, pulled at by a force emanting from the interface between Primary Location Alpha and the *Nightfall*. They

came to a stop, spinning miniature missiles, propellant roaring uselessly, until they burned out and hung there, glinting softly.

A strange stillness fell. Dantioch's eyes were cold and hard and full of hate. The mountain drew in a breath.

Then the Pharos sang an apocalyptic fanfare.

The bolts flew suddenly from the room and onto the *Nightfall*. Equipment was wrenched from desks. Parchments and data-wafers whipped into the air in a storm, pulled into vortex of light turning around the hole in space leading to the *Nightfall*'s command deck.

Krukesh's triumph transformed into horror. He bellowed orders that nobody heard, and raised his gun. One of his Atramentar bodyguards turned to escape. As soon as he lifted one foot from the stage he was yanked from the ground, crashing into the other two that were flanking Krukesh. All three hit the field edge and were caught. They hurtled around and around the vortex's whipping arms, their forms distorted by the titanic energies exerted upon them by the xenos machine and tearing them limb from limb. Dantioch's chair was torn from its mountings and tumbled up off the floor and through the threshold.

The other Night Lords around the tuning stage were ripped from their feet and fell screaming into the light. The view of the *Nightfall* had become a narrow circle swallowed by a roaring swirl of unfettered alien energies. Lightning thrashed it, stabbing out into the room, earthing itself in the armour of legionaries and bursting them apart with crackling energy.

The quantum pulses reached their screaming apex.

Green light burned from the rock of Primary Location Alpha. The remaining Night Lords screamed as their sensitive eyes burned out and their eardrums were shattered by the roar of the device.

Another lowing horn blast echoed from every opening in the mountain. Actinic green flares haloed around the peak. Mount Pharos shook as the full power of its quantum engines was unleashed for the first time in an age.

The energies streamed through Dantioch, ripping at the fabric of his being. The rush of it was exhilarating. His pain was forgotten, even as he knew that he was being disassembled atom by atom. Warnings bleated from the paltry Imperial machinery. One console after another gave out under the strain, showering bouncing sparks over the black floor. Lines of cables burst into flame. Metal melted.

The mountain trembled.

The grinding of stone rumbled up through the corridors as the black glass cracked. Outside, great cliffs tumbled from their footings and roared down into the lowlands.

Polux was tugged at by the draw of the beam, only the spiked manacles biting into his wrists and ankles preventing him from being sucked into the singularity growing in the wall of the Pharos. He rose up from his cross, dragged at by the light, blood streaming from him where his restraints bit into his flesh.

‘*Dantioch! Stop! Stop! You will destroy us all!*’

His words were lost in the mountain’s roar. It sounded again, louder than the greatest Titan’s war-horn.

Dantioch was lifted into the air, his arms out, green light whirling around him.

The last Night Lords were plucked away, crumpled into shreds at the edge of the interface field, laid low by lightning or smashed into the walls of Primary Location Alpha. Those that hit the vortex askance left limbs behind. Skraivok took his chances and ran forwards, diving into it head first.

And so only Krukesh remained.

The Lord of the Kyroptera leaned into the storm, head bowed, fighting to plant one foot of his mighty Terminator plate in front of the other. Incredibly, he managed three full steps, teeth gritted, dark eyes narrowed against the gold dazzle of the Pharos.

Surrounded by the wavering shimmer of unfettered energy, Dantioch turned in the air towards Polux. He looked his friend in the eye one final time, and bowed his head.

Then he turned back into the vortex light and roared out his pain, his need to see the Night Lords destroyed driving on the Pharos to destruction.

Krukesh’s legs were tugged out from under him. His gauntleted fingers scrabbled at the floor as he was lifted up.

He went hurtling into the blazing field, his wordless scream loud enough to compete with the Pharos’ roar.

Polux screwed his eyes shut.

Primary Location Alpha exploded. Polux’s restraints ripped free of the cross and he was flung across the room, slamming into the far wall with bone-cracking force. Every machine in the chamber detonated simultaneously.

In a heartbeat, the light went out.

Barabas Dantioch dropped to the floor, armour smoking. His head hit the stone hard, dislodging his mask. It clattered away across the floor, and all was still.

For the first time in untold aeons, the engines of the Pharos fell silent.

THIRTY

Hero
Mask
Last light

Thandamell reeled from the blinding light of the Pharos. The crew of the *Nightfall* ran before it, too terror-stricken to pay heed to their masters' barked orders. Mortal men and women clutched at their faces as the beacon's light seared their retinas blind. Alarms howled. Fearing attack, the Night Lords on the bridge opened fire, gunning down their own crew, firing wildly into the howling light.

Through the screaming maelstrom, others came.

They came in pieces, limbs and heads blasting like cannonballs from light years away, translocated instantaneously by the Pharos. When they hit flesh, they pulverised it. An Atramentar Terminator, his body mangled, hurtled through the portal and slammed into a crew station, destroying it utterly.

More bodies came through. Some had melted, their armour and skin run together like wax. One appeared unharmed, stumbling to a stop on the deck, only to be gunned down by his nervous brethren.

Thandamell forced himself to look into the vortex. The aperture allowing him to see into the cavern on Sotha was shrinking, whirling away into a twist of heatless flame.

'Stop firing!' ordered Thandamell. 'Cease!'

The light grew brighter and brighter, then gave out with a thunderclap that knocked the warriors of the flagship to the ground.

For a moment the command deck of the *Nightfall* was a void of greenish-white light. Thandamell blinked away painful afterimages and got shakily to his feet. Alarms shrieked. Mortals screamed as they scrambled to exit the command deck.

Scattered all about the plating, draped on crew stations, embedded in the fabric of the walls, were bodies.

The Night Lords from Sotha were dead – all save Krukesh the Pale, and Gendor Skraivok, the Painted Count.

Krukesh knelt, the bat wings on his Terminator cowl twisted askew. He clutched at his face, groaning, blood running between his fingers. Skraivok lumbered to his feet, fighting against the dead weight of his unpowered armour.

Guns were levelled at him.

'Put up your weapons!' He pointed a finger at Krukesh. 'Hearken to me! Krukesh had the chance to rescue Sevatar. He had the chance to find our primarch. But he would not. He wanted power for himself, and bent the power of the artefact on Sotha to his own ends.'

‘Gendor Skraivok,’ said Thandamell. ‘You are hardly the paragon of boundless altruism yourself.’

‘I am but a loyal son of our Legion,’ said Skraivok. He thumped a fist against his chest and bowed with difficulty.

‘Do not listen to him!’ gasped Krukesh. He let his hands drop, and looked around blindly. Within the coffin of his armour, his white face shone wetly with fresh pink burns. ‘He is a poison. Kill him! Get me to the apothecarion, restore my sight. Then we shall make our plans for the regrouping of the Legion.’

Nobody moved.

‘Kill him!’ commanded Krukesh. ‘Why does no one act? I *order* you!’ His voice rose to a shriek. ‘Kill Skraivok!’

Thandamell looked from Krukesh to Skraivok and back again. The rest of the Night Lords remained still. Skraivok laughed. ‘They will not follow you, O mighty lord of the Kyroptera!’ he said nastily. ‘You have overstepped yourself. The spirit of the Legion lives on. You were unwise to believe you could seize it for yourself. Can’t you see that? No, I suppose you can’t…’

Krukesh attempted to rise, but the weight of his crippled Cataphractii armour was too great, and he howled impotently.

‘You are conceited! Arrogant! Snapping at Sevatar’s heels for scraps of glory just as he whined after our father!’

Skraivok stepped heavily over to the kneeling Kyroptera lord. He plucked a fallen bolt pistol from the deck. Krukesh hunted about for the source of the noise, his sightless eyes blinking.

The Night Lords shifted uneasily. Thandamell held up a hand to stay them.

‘There is but one law from Nostramo to cleave to, Krukesh the Pale. The strong shall prevail, and you are weak. Krukesh the Blind…’ Skraivok fired a single bolt into the head of his superior. ‘Krukesh the Dead.’

Krukesh sagged within his plate, blood sluicing from his shattered cranium.

Skraivok calmly tossed the gun aside.

‘I kill only this traitor to the Legion. I am done with death today. Without our primarch, we are finished as a unified force. We have two choices before us – continue to follow Krukesh’s example and watch our Legion fragment into petty bands under competing warlords, or reforge ourselves into a whole and press on to Terra, to aid the Warmaster in his war against our greatest oppressor of all… the False Emperor of Mankind!’

‘Fine sentiments, Skraivok,’ said Thandamell. ‘We have no idea as to the location of Night Haunter, or the First Captain who abandoned us. You forget we were already ordered to regroup, and without Sevatar or Curze the Kyroptera will continue to fall upon each other. The Legion is done, as are you. It is time we go our separate ways, and yours is

darker than mine.'

Boltgun slides were racked. Skraivok laughed in the faces of his brothers.

'If you would but listen, you would not aim your weapons at me. You would not be so eager to kill your own kind.'

'You are out of time, Painted Count,' said Thandamell. He raised his hand.

'I am not,' said Skraivok. 'You will permit me to live, because I know things which will turn the tide of this war, once we relay them to Horus…'

He paused. Silence reigned, and he smiled.

'Most importantly, that Guilliman's cronies at Sotha believe that Terra has already fallen. They are not moving to reinforce it – they skulk in Ultramar licking their wounds, thinking that the Warmaster will one day turn his attentions to them. Terra stands without the Ultramarines, Sanguinius' Angels or the First Legion. It will be ours for the taking!'

Thandamell let out a long breath. His hand clenched and lowered slowly. 'Very well. We will permit you to live, for now. Brothers – take his sword, then remove him to the brig.'

Skraivok frowned. 'I have no sword.'

'Then what is that?' said Thandamell, pointing to his waist.

Skraivok looked down with a rising sense of dread. Scabbarded at his side was the sword he had given to Kellenkir.

Thandamell's warriors came for him.

At the very edge of hearing, he heard a dry laugh.

Polux struggled to his hands and knees. The pain spikes were so much junk, like everything else in the room. All the illumination in the chamber was dead. The sun was over the horizon and the light of early morning shone through the aperture of the promontory, highlighting curls of smoke. Shakily, he got up. He plucked the wrecked spikes from his interface ports and shattered his bonds with his Emperor-given strength. He limped through the wreckage-strewn tuning floor, toward the still form of the warsmith, his friend.

'Brother Dantioch,' he said. 'Barabas!'

He cradled the warsmith in his arms, and hope bloomed in him. Dantioch lived, for the moment.

The Iron Warrior's mask lay on the floor, and so Polux looked upon a face he had never seen. Dantioch was older than he expected. Lines of pain were etched into his scarred face that nothing could erase.

His eyes opened. They moved sightlessly, blinded by the intense flare of the Pharos.

'Alexis…?' he whispered.

'I am here, Barabas.'

The warsmith clutched at the arms encircling him. ‘I never thought to call one such as you friend,’ he smiled.

‘You are my friend, Barabas, and my teacher.’

‘I am dying.’

‘You will live!’ Polux said fiercely.

Dantioch shook his head. Polux wished he had water to give him, anything.

His croaking voice became insistent. ‘Listen to me. I saw such things in the light. This war is only the beginning…’ He swallowed, and his throat clicked painfully. ‘The beginning… of the end…’

Dantioch gasped and settled back, his strength finally leaving him.

‘But I am glad, Alexis. I am glad to have been. I am glad to have known you. It is something that friendship can exist at all in this universe of terror and betrayal.’

‘Quiet now. You must save your strength!’

Dantioch’s scarred mouth cracked into a smile. ‘I have no strength left. I have done my duty, and I am no longer ashamed.’ His back arched in pain, and he gasped. ‘All hail the Emperor of Mankind, still beloved by all. May His dream be saved, even if we cannot.’

A long rattling breath escaped him, and his face stilled. Dantioch’s body went limp in Polux’s arms.

‘Barabas!’ cried Polux. ‘Barabas! Brother!’

He bent his head and wept for his enemy, his friend. Tenderly he crossed Dantioch’s arms upon his chest, as befit a champion of the Legions who had fallen in service to the Imperium.

The warriors of Ultramar would find Polux there, hours later, his head still bowed in mourning.

THIRTY-ONE

Aftermath
Hero of the Imperium
Emperor resurgent

The after-light of the Pharos burned brighter than a dying star in the aether. With a soundless pulse, it had torn outwards in every direction, bursting from the apertures of the great mountain. A raging pulse of electromagnetic energy came with it, destroying every electrical item in Sothopolis. Armoured suits locked or went limp. Lumen globes burst. Reactors overloaded.

On into space the front raced, blasting through the Night Lords fleet in wave of blinding light. Systems went offline. Ships drifted, at the mercy of Sotha's gravitational pull.

Out, out from Sotha the pulse burned, driving back the Ruinstorm from the fringes of the system, piercing the very veil of reality. In the warp it flared brighter than the Astronomican, quelling for a moment the raging tempest.

Roboute Guilliman's beleaguered fleet battled against deadly currents, lost in the madness of the empyrean. There they might have remained for all eternity, had the Pharos not flared so brightly in that instant. Within their scrying domes and isolation blisters, the Navigators of the Ultramarines caught the glare of the dying beacon, locked onto it, and redirected their vessels out of the warp, directly into the Sothan System.

Gunfire still rattled in the lower halls of the Pharos as Roboute Guilliman himself strode into the ruin of Primary Location Alpha, his Invictarus guard at his back. Corvo's men had secured the area. Half a dozen functioning lumens had been found, and set up around the devastated cavern, but their light was dim – incapable of illuminating such an alien space, all they did was accentuate the wreckage cluttering the floor.

Teeth gritted against the pain of his wound, Corvo stood to attention. His armour was failing, the wound in his side was still a hot stripe of pain, but he would not appear weak before his primarch.

'The hero of Astagar proves his worth again.' Guilliman saluted Corvo, then frowned with concern. 'Stand at ease, Lucretius. You look ready to die.'

Corvo settled gratefully against the wall.

'Report,' said Guilliman.

'The remainder of my company have made landfall to the south. They are pursuing fugitive elements of the Night Lords into the forest. They will not last long. There are still a number of Night Lords elements scattered through the mountain, but most of them are low on ammunition, and in broken plate. I have the upper levels and Primary Location Ultra under heavy guard. My own warriors' equipment is non-functioning, but relief forces from my flotilla are already joining them, and we'll begin the push to clear the Pharos out

shortly. I did not order the detonation of the Mechanicum machines, and the quantum engines are whole. If only I were quicker, I might have been able to prevent the destruction here.'

'What is done is done, Lucretius. Dantioch acted as he thought best. The Pharos remains in our hands, although I fear it will never function again.' He fell into troubled thought. A bright flash from outside lit up the chamber, and more followed. The sky boomed louder than thunder, a crackle of explosions dainty as celebratory pyrotechnics, then more titanic rumblings. They glanced upward.

'The Night Lords fleet is in tatters,' said Guilliman. 'Many of their vessels appear to have been disabled by the Pharos' final light pulse. Several have relit their reactors and fled, those few that remain are outmatched and will pay the ultimate price for their treachery. Five of their ships are already down, several thousand of their legionaries fallen. I shall have precise calculations soon. A poor score. Too many of their craft have escaped. I had wished to annihilate them all.'

He shook his head in disappointment.

'What a disaster. Our operations here will take time that we simply do not have to re-establish, and the colony is devastated. Nevertheless, Captain Corvo, you have done well.'

Corvo made the sign of the aquila. 'You honour me, my lord.'

'Captain Varus, Captain Antoninus,' said Guilliman. 'Detail your companies to finish the purge of the mountain. Corvo, you are hereby relieved. Return to your ships. Rest. Repair. We have won this battle, but learned a valuable lesson. I will not be caught out like this again.'

'Are my ships not required for the pursuit? I stand ready to mete out vengeance, my lord.'

'After this conversation, Lucretius, you will take my personal transport and go directly to the apothecarion aboard my ship where my own physicians will tend to you personally. That is my wish and my order.' He sighed tiredly. 'But first to other matters. How is our friend Captain Polux?'

They looked over at the Imperial Fist sitting immobile by his friend in the centre of the chamber. Someone had draped a blanket around his shoulders, but otherwise he remained as he had been found, motionless with grief.

'Refusing food, water, or help. He has not moved since we came here, but sits in vigil.'

'Well, that will not do. Polux!' Guilliman called, raising his voice.

Polux looked up.

'I command you to rise, Captain Alexis Polux of the Imperial Fists,' ordered Guilliman.

He stood, the blanket slipping from his shoulders. 'My lord Guilliman.'

'It is time you let us take care of the Warsmith. We shall commemorate his deeds this evening, as night falls, in a manner befitting a true hero of the Imperium.'

The Imperial Fist nodded dumbly.

Suzerein guards came to him carrying a bier. They made to raise Dantioch up, but Polux stopped them.

'No,' said Polux softly but dangerously. 'None shall touch him. I will carry him, for he was my brother.'

The sun sank weakly through the battle's haze, the fog of conflict clung thick on the sides of Mount Pharos. Thin towers of smoke built themselves from the forest's ashes. The age-old peat of the lower slopes had caught in several locations, and would likely burn for years.

Patchily bald, blackened, covered with the bright stone scars of landslides, the mountain stood strong nonetheless.

Upon the high promontory a company of warriors gathered. The fifty-three surviving members of the Aegida Company, Captain Polux, his Lightkeepers, the last four men of the Sothan Auxilia, and Beta-Phi-97.

The sun shone light filtered red by the smog upon their wargear. Three servitors worked their way down the line of the Aegida company. From their chests extended small paint units, jet-brushes neat as an insect's folded mandibles that worked with precise, hissing passes over the Ultima of each Ultramarine as Roboute Guilliman addressed them.

'Our losses have been great, but we know victory,' the primarch said. 'The One Hundred and Ninety-Ninth Aegida Company will be reconstituted and reinforced. Captain Polux will raise a greater fortress upon the peak of Mount Pharos. Never again will Sotha fall. Let it stand forever as a bulwark against the Emperor's enemies. The Night Lords came against us here, and were found wanting. Many of them are dead, the rest flee back to their dark places. Every foe who dares this world will face the same fate – this I swear.

'For all of you, my sons, I have marks of recognition for your sacrifice. But we of the Legion did not fight alone. Without the bravery and fortitude of the colonists of Sotha, all would have been lost. They warred alongside us, guided us, and died with us. The bodies of the Sothan First Auxilia, First Platoon, shall be interred with all honour in a tomb within the Garden of Remembrance on Macragge, where a monument will be raised in the honour of one Sergeant Mericus Giraldus and his troopers, whose honourable silence in the face of great pain bought vital time for Captain Corvo. In further recognition of their sacrifice, henceforth, the men of the One Hundred and Ninety-Ninth Aegida Company will bear the crossed scythes as a mark of respect and honour to the common men of Sotha who aided them in this darkest of hours.'

As the servitors worked their way down the line of battered legionaries, they left this new emblem framed by the spreading horns of the Ultima. The blades of the scythes stood guard over the pure white of Ultramar's sigil.

Guilliman went to stand before Oberdeii and his surviving comrades.

'Neophytes, you have been tested in battle, and you have not been found wanting. You are all to proceed to your final stage implantation. Following this, you shall be full battle-

brothers of the Hundred and Ninety-Ninth.'

He took a step back and bowed his head to the young warriors, who shifted both in unease and intense pride. The surviving Space Marines, their new brethren, saluted them.

Guilliman went on. 'Neophyte Oberdeii, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Legion Reconnaissance Sergeant, effective immediately.'

Oberdeii blinked hard. Tebecai could not suppress a pleased smile at the look on his face.

And so it went on, each man and transhuman solemnly decorated by the Lord of Ultramar, as the smokes of destruction smeared themselves across the pristine skies of the world.

'We march for Macragge!' shouted the assembled warriors, Ultramarine and human alike. 'Courage and honour!'

'And now to the peak,' said the primarch, turning his solemn gaze to the highest rampart of the Emperor's Watch.

Up stone steps lined by Invictarus Suzereins they filed, through the broken gates to the redoubt, thence to the wide platform surmounting the top. At the far end, away from the gun emplacement and nested arrays of astronomical instruments, was a pyre of dried quicktree wood.

Atop it, his armour battered but his face serene, lay the body of Warsmith Barabas Dantioch.

Guilliman stopped by the pyre, his great stature allowing him to look down upon the dead warrior.

'You have not replaced his mask,' he said.

'It was a symbol of shame to him,' said Polux. 'He wore it as a constant reminder of his Legion's betrayal. He no longer has anything to be ashamed of.'

'That he does not.'

Guilliman held out his hand. Captain Casmir placed a golden torch into his grip, a hot flame burning true in the horn at the end. Guilliman presented it to Polux.

'The honour should be yours.'

'My lord, if it pleases you – it would a far greater honour done to Barabas if it were you, the mightiest of the Emperor's sons, who sends him on his way.'

'Very well,' said Guilliman, nodding in deference. With a crackle of parting wood, he thrust the torch deep into the quicktree pyre. They stepped back as the fire caught. Tongues of flame curled around the body of Dantioch, blackening his armour, licking at his scarred flesh amidst pillars of scented smoke that carried heavenwards.

'Company!' bellowed the foremost of Guilliman's guard.

'So passes Dantioch, hero of the Imperium!' they roared, and discharged their boltguns. The weapons boomed as they launched their projectiles, the propellant igniting and

sending them fizzing into the sky, banging again as they breached the sound barrier.

‘So passes Dantioch, hero of the Imperium!’

‘So passes Dantioch, hero of the Imperium!’

The sky darkened. The pyre of Barabas Dantioch bathed his comrades in heat and light. The last rays of the sun struck the Pharos, red beams glowing in the cave mouths of flank and peak.

No return light shone in reply, and nor did it ever again. The song of the mountain was done, and night fell on Imperium Secundus for true.

Primary Location Beta bustled with activity. A twin chamber shaped like an hourglass, it had been identified by Dantioch sometime in his early experiments as a potential tuning stage before later being abandoned in favour of other newly found locations. It was shabby, dank, and damaged by the battle. Broken machines were piled in a corner, the walls riven with fine cracks. Only now that Primary Location Alpha had been destroyed had it been pressed into active service.

The image of Sanguinius jumped and popped like a bad pict feed. Tech-adepts hurried about, adjusting dials and power feeds, attempting to stabilise it.

‘The connection will not last long, my lord,’ said one. ‘You must be brief.’

‘Very well,’ said Guilliman. ‘Polux?’

Polux stood at the centre of the new tuning stage, face pale with effort, sweat beading on his forehead. ‘I am doing what I can, but I am not Dantioch, and the Pharos is not functioning as it did before.’

Sanguinius sat in all his regal pomp upon an engraved throne that had been set up in the remains of the Chapel of Remembrance. His eyes followed the Lord of Ultramar as he took his position on the stage in front of Polux. They faced each other across the stars, two demigods enthroned alike in ruin.

‘Leave us!’ Sanguinius called to the Mechanicum personnel in the Pharos.

‘My lord,’ said the newly-appointed magos. ‘My acolytes and I are needed to–’

‘I said *leave us*,’ repeated Sanguinius icily.

‘Polux must stay,’ Guilliman insisted.

‘Very well.’

All but Polux and a score of mindless servitors dutifully filed out of the room.

Only when the room was clear did Sanguinius speak. ‘Brother. Curze was here.’

‘What?’ cried Guilliman in alarm. ‘Are you harmed?’

‘No. He came to talk, or so he said.’

‘Did he?’

Sanguinius shifted on his throne. His heavy robes rustled. ‘He did, although he nearly killed Azkaellon and slaughtered many of my most trusted Sanguinary Guard.’

‘What did he want?’

‘Absolution? Acceptance? Who knows? I do not think even he truly understands what he wants. But he did say something, brother, amid all his self-pitying babble, that I cannot put from my mind.’

‘The poor philosophy of the insane and the inane,’ said Guilliman. ‘Pay no heed to it – he has the faculties of an anguished youth, and we must all suffer his pretensions to omniscience.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Sanguinius. ‘Or perhaps not.’

He paused, weighing his next words. The two brothers regarded each other.

‘Roboute, I hereby summon you back to my side on Macragge.’

Guilliman’s smile went tight. ‘Brother? You summon me? That is quite a change of heart for you.’ He aimed for levity, but Sanguinius did not smile.

‘You must return,’ said Sanguinius. ‘I *command* it.’

‘Surely you have matters under control there? I have to set Sotha in order. The Pharos is badly damaged, the colony ruined. There is a chance we can set it right, and Imperium Secundus will be safe once more. I will be a week, that is all. Give me a week.’

‘No,’ said Sanguinius firmly. ‘You will come back to Macragge immediately.’

Guilliman pursed his lips. ‘And this is a command?’

‘Issued with the authority you yourself bestowed. You made me emperor, Roboute, so either abandon the charade or make it real. Before you return, you will find the Lion using the Pharos, and demand his return from wherever he has gone. No excuses, no obfuscation. Give him no leeway to misinterpret or elaborate on what I say. It is a command to both of you – return *immediately*. Curze is here, the Pharos was nearly destroyed. It is time our Lord Protector took upon himself the full burden of his role. Find him, and bring him back here to me. *Now*.’

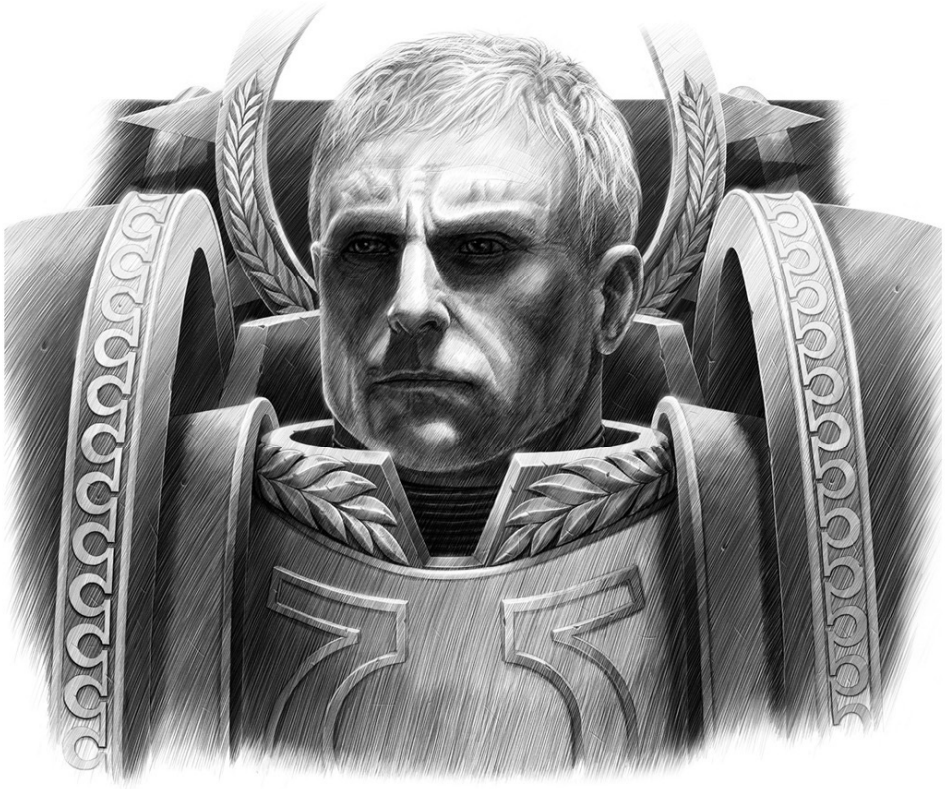
Their eyes and wills locked. For a long, tense moment, it appeared that Guilliman would defy the one he had proclaimed the new emperor of all mankind.

The theoreticals of what that would mean flickered through his powerful mind; the collapse of all that they had built. The end of Imperium Secundus and ultimately the fall of Ultramar itself. At its best, the result would be dissension and a fracturing of the effort against Horus, at worst strife or even open war could erupt between their Legions.

There was only one viable practical. The last and most inevitable of practicals.

He bowed low, never imagining that such a gesture could be so hard to perform.

‘Of course, my lord emperor. Your will be done.’



Primarch Roboute Guilliman, from Dantioch's sketchbook

EPILOGUE

Hunger

Far beyond the fringes of the galaxy there was naught but endless black.

Past the last few stray stars plying their lonely track through the cold night, past the dead worlds and the fragments of galactic collisions billions of years gone, past the probes sent out by extinct races recorded in no history… past all that and beyond, there was a night sea studded with the diamond islands of distant, lonely galaxies.

Though incomprehensibly vast, this sea was not empty. Great behemoths of the deep lurked there.

Into the eternal blackness, a flash of quantum energy shone out at many times the speed of light; a brief flare, milliseconds in duration, projecting from an unremarkable spiral of stars.

It was not missed.

In the darkness, something of limitless hunger stirred in a slumber that had lasted for aeons. A million frozen and unblinking eyes saw the flash, tripping cascades of stimuli. Their purpose served, the eyes died.

The entity processed the message the eyes provided without ever truly awakening. Automatically, instinctively, its gargantuan, dreaming mind analysed the signal, comparing it against all parameters for the one thing it sought.

Prey.

Slowly, glacially, the great devourer shifted its course.

AFTERWORD

Night falls.

Those two words are evocative of so much: the collapse of the Imperium, Night Lords falling upon their victims, the dying of the Emperor's dream, the return of Old Night, and of course it is almost the name of Konrad Curze's flagship.

This is a story that marks the beginning of the end for Imperium Secundus, and with it what we might consider the second act of the Horus Heresy. The betrayal has been enacted. Horus rampages unopposed across the stars. The loyalists have reacted and begun to recover from their shock. Roboute Guilliman's desperate 'practical' of establishing a new Imperium is a solid reality, yet still the galaxy burns as he and his brothers skulk unknowingly at the edge of events. The three loyalist primarchs on Macragge are certain that the Emperor must be dead.

So much depends on the overturning of that opinion, and it all begins here.

Pharos had to convey all this, to establish what has happened in Imperium Secundus in those fateful months since the Thramas Crusade, to unpick the mystery of the Pharos, to establish what the Night Lords have been doing after their shattering at the Lion's hands, and to lay the groundwork for what is yet to come. Though *Pharos* isn't quite the starting grid for the final race to Terra, it's certainly in sight. And as every Black Library novel must, it had to be a rip-roaring adventure in its own right, a tale of heroism, insurmountable darkness, and hope.

As you can imagine, this was quite a big ask for my first full-length foray into the Horus Heresy. The honour of being asked to contribute to Games Workshop's most popular novel series (and a *New York Times* bestselling one at that!) vied equally in my mind with the fear of messing it up.

Writing fiction of this kind presents a host of challenges. Continuity is perhaps the most pressing, especially so far into the series. I was a latecomer to the Heresy, and although I have done my utmost to familiarise myself with its many subplots and characters, it is impossible to hold them all in one's own head. For keeping both me and the story in line, I can only offer my heartfelt thanks to Laurie Goulding, the Horus Heresy series editor.

I've written several Warhammer 40,000 books, but the universe of the 31st millennium is a very different place, and to capture the tone of it a significant redecoration of headspace was required. This is an era of primarchs, of hundreds of thousands of Space Marines. It is a less superstitious era, but one where the terrible powers of the warp have revealed themselves.

The roots of the future lie in the past. Perhaps the 41st millennium could never have been any other way?

Questions of predeterminism fascinate me, it is something that I come back to over and over in my own thoughts and therefore inevitably in my fiction, and I could not pass up

the chance to examine this through Sanguinius and Konrad Curze – two primarchs who are in many respects opposite sides of the same coin.

Curze is my favourite of the Emperor's sons. To my mind he possesses a depth that some of his brothers lack. Of all of them, he knows the most. He is a tragic figure, so close to redemption, but never quite reaching it. If we look distastefully on his less savoury habits, perhaps we can forgive him. He is, after all, insane.

History lies as heavily on the inhabitants of the 31st millennium as it does on Curze (and indeed on us too). What Curze possesses is an awareness of this truth. Through the Pharos we have a glimpse of deep history of the galaxy. The Horus Heresy is, after all, only the latest flare up of a war that has raged since long before mankind existed. As someone intrigued by the deep time of the Warhammer 40,000 universe, even just hinting at that broader struggle was immensely satisfying.

No grand story is complete without its players. From great post-human primarchs to the lowliest human line trooper, they are small in the face of time and space no matter how mighty they appear to their fellows, but each is a universe unto himself. To allow us to experience that vicariously is the great gift of fiction. As the struggle for the galaxy proceeds, it is reflected in microcosm in the war for the hearts and souls of men, even within the ranks of the Night Lords.

It is easy to regard the sons of Curze as cartoon villains, bloody fiends as relentless as any B-movie maniac. I was keen not to depict them as such. The Legiones Astartes who make up the warriors of the murderous VIII Legion surely did not leap from their mother's arms intent on torture and death. The process by which a man becomes a monster is another thing that intrigues me, and I was keen to explore it.

Furthermore, although the Night Lords look down upon those who have already given themselves to the Ruinous Powers, they are not immune to the manipulations and influences of the neverborn. *Pharos* was my opportunity to explore that for the first time.

We cannot ignore that which awaits us all: the final curtain of death. Authors tend to fall in love with their creations, and no matter their original plans for their heroes and villains, often shield them from the ultimate end. As someone concerned with the progression of time, the role of fate, and the intersection of fleeting life with the cold mechanisms of reality, death preoccupies me. A great war rages, and there will be casualties, some of them dear to us. I am rather bloody handed in that regard, I am afraid. Death lives in my keyboard.

Finally, a word on Black Library itself. A lifelong fan of science fiction and fantasy, I have nevertheless been rather ambivalent about tie-in fiction. It never felt 'real' to me, as any story or novel is so easily overwritten by the next movie or TV show (although my fellow author James Swallow, through many discussions, has convinced me of tie-in fiction's many other merits).

Black Library stories do not feel that way. They have always felt 'real'.

In writing these books I am engaged directly in the feeding of these fantastic universes. I

have been involved in the Games Workshop hobby since 1984, and it has played a huge part in my personal and professional life. To contribute to so august a series as the Horus Heresy is nothing but an enormous privilege. As readers, it is your positive reception of my previous Black Library stories that has allowed me to do this, so thank you all.

Guy Haley

September 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader*, *The Last Days of Ector* and *Broken Sword*, for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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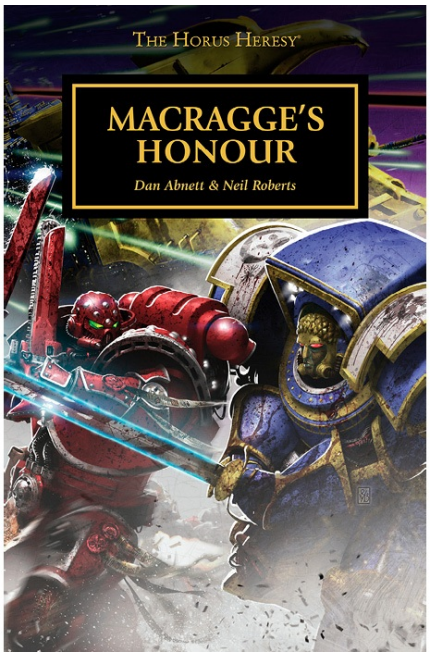

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